Hassan, Lamontagne outline visions for future at debate

NASHUA — The two nominees for New Hampshire's highest public office wasted no time on Thursday criticizing each other's positions on everything from health care, kindergarten, taxes and education.

During a gubernatorial debate at Rivier University, Democrat Maggie Hassan and Republican Ovide Lamontagne were civil and bold, but both agreed they have fundamental differences in the way they would lead the state.

Hassan noting that Jon Stewart, host of the political comedy “The Daily Show,” has poked fun of the state's legislative leaders.

Faulting the Legislature for poor behavior, Hassan said she would like to change the tone of the elected body that has “dismantled” a lot in the past two years.

“We have a real choice in this election,” said Hassan, a former state senator for six years, adding she has concrete solutions and her own innovation plan to develop partnerships with business communities and attract more young people to New Hampshire.

“I am running for governor, not the Legislature,” Lamontagne countered, maintaining the executive branch has too much power in the Granite State. If elected, Lamontagne pledged to put the people above politics and serve as a governor for all of the people.

During tough economic times, Lamontagne said he would be a leader — a small-town mayor for New Hampshire — who would be an engaged governor. Promising to sign or veto any bill that comes across his desk, Lamontagne, a business lawyer, also said he would reject a tax or fee increase over the next two years.

“The big picture is this — we need to move this state forward” said Hassan, adding New Hampshire must be innovative, creative and vibrant while rejecting the policies of the past. “We can reverse some of the bad decisions from the past two years.”

She maintained that her opponent opposes kindergarten, again suggesting that recent budget cuts may have been a factor in some of Manchester's class sizes topping 40 students this fall.
“I believe in speaking the truth, not in speaking about myths,” argued Lamontagne, contending the situation in Manchester has nothing to do with the state budget. And although he does support kindergarten, Lamontagne said decisions about it should be made at the local level and not mandated from Concord.

Promoting the need for more hands-on learning, Hassan said she would propose to restore funding to the university system that was cut, in exchange for freezing tuition so that New Hampshire students can afford to stay here for their education.

In regards to health care, Hassan, of Exeter, said she led an effort to make sure young adults can stay on their parent's health insurance until they are 26. She and her opponent differ on their approach to making sure every opponent has access to affordable health care. Hassan said Lamontagne has supported Paul Ryan's voucher program that would have the Legislature run Medicare for seniors.

“There are implications to that … I don't think that is the way,” she said of senior citizens receiving a voucher and then having to negotiate for medical care.

Lamontagne, of Manchester, stressed that the federal government has too much control over health care, saying laws must be modified and amended so that there is more competition in the health insurance industry.

He supports creating incentives to lower premiums, but not turning over providers to the federal government, said Lamontagne.

“New Hampshire is an exceptional state,” he said, sharing a story about his grandfather working hard at a young age while living in the Millyard.

Perhaps the one thing the two opponents did agree on was that New Hampshire is a remarkable place, according to Hassan, who said when everyone works together, many challenges can be overcome.

Thursday's Lincoln-Douglas-style debate was attended by a small crowd and moderated by Christopher Williams, president of the Greater Nashua Chamber of Commerce. It was presented by the Rivier University President's Circle.

---

*Kimberly Houghton may be reached at khoughton@newstote.com.*