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A fine day for a Tea Party

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PagosaSUN.com staff

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On Tax Day last Thursday, April 15, about 150 people met in the Senior Center at the Ross Aragon Community Center for a Tea Party.

While the crowd appeared united on several issues — mentions of health care reform or anything regarding President Obama, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi or Sen. Harry Reid were roundly greeted with boing and catcalls — not much discussion was given to actual tax issues, despite the large “Taxed Enough Already” sign that pointed attendees to the event.

Linda Bunney, vice president for the Archuleta County Republican Women, made it clear in her opening remarks that, despite the event being billed as a Tea Party rally (and despite numerous national Tea Party claims of non-affiliation), the event was a Republican Party-sponsored event.

“Every day, we turn on the news to hear some new horror from this administration,” Bunney said. “You’ve also heard our president declare that this is not a Christian nation.”

In fact, last year at a press conference in Turkey, President Obama said, “One of the great strengths of the United States is ... we have a very large Christian population — we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation. We consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values,” rebuking the notion that the U.S. has an official religion.

Bunney’s comments was met with a round of boing, the crowd apparently displeased that the president would make that comment.

Preparing to introduce Evergreen businessman Dan Maes, Tea Party candidate for governor, Bunney asked the crowd if they believed government was too big, to which the crowd responded with affirmative applause. However, when she asked the crowd if they believed taxes were too high, the response was less enthusiastic, apparently in line with a New York Times/CBS News poll released last week which showed that 62 percent of all respondents in the poll said that the income tax they have to pay is fair, while 30 percent called it unfair. However, the same poll found that 64 percent of Tea Party supporters think the administration has raised taxes over the past two years.

In fact, a Brookings Institute report released last week indicated that taxes are at their lowest levels in 60 years. Likewise, according to federal reports, as well as a report by the non-profit, non-partisan Tax Foundation, taxes went down this year for 98 percent of all Americans, due in large part to expanded credits created through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

After being introduced by Bunney, Maes took the microphone, explaining his platform as a Tea Party candidate for governor. Maes began his speech with criticism of Gov. Bill Ritter and the continuation of the Head Tax (first passed in Colorado in 1969). While Maes stated that, as governor, he would work to eliminate the Head Tax, those taxes are actually municipal taxes.

Maes quickly moved from taxation to matters of state’s rights and the energy economy. “I will not jeopardize the beauty of this state and the quality of water, but we must find a happy medium with our energy industry,” he said.

Mentioning gas, oil, coal and uranium, Maes said Colorado needed to move “to do what we need to do to get it out of the ground.” Maes also mentioned a willingness to pursue wind energy on the eastern plains and solar energy in the San Luis Valley, “But not with subsidies.”

Taking several questions from the audience, Maes took some heat on the issue on immigration reform after mentioning a mandate to have employers verify an applicant’s citizenship through a nationwide data base — a proposition that appeared to trouble several attendees.

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"Look, we're not getting into tin hat territory here," Maes said, explaining that such a data base was no different than those kept for credit reporting.

Maes's campaign stump finally circled back to taxes as an audience member asked about the repeal of Colorado's property tax exemption for senior citizens — a subject no doubt dear to many attendees, most of whom appeared to be of retirement age.

Although Maes did not promise to reinstate the exemption, he said, "Shame on Bill Ritter for taking your property tax exemption."

(The Colorado General Assembly last year passed Senate Bill 09-276, suspending the Senior Citizen Property Tax Exemption for the tax year 2009. Unless the General Assembly changes the statute this year, that exemption will return for tax year 2010, payable in 2011.)

Lacking the fiery rhetoric that has characterized many Tea Party rallies across the country, Thursday's gathering was less a Tax Day protest and more a forum for Republican candidates. That should not have surprised anyone as the results from last week's New York Times/CBS News poll reported that 66 percent of all Tea Party supporters said that they usually or always vote Republican as opposed to just 5 percent who said they usually or always voted Democrat.

However, red meat was served up to the Tea Party supporters when J Paul Brown, candidate for the House District 59 seat (currently held by Rep. Ellen Roberts), stepped up to the podium.

Brown, an Ignacio rancher and former La Plata County Commissioner, began his speech on the topic of taxes, saying, "We are paying way too much, too many taxes: Income taxes, death taxes, capital gains taxes, property taxes and the list goes on and on, all the fees and everything on top of that."

Brown claimed that the Colorado Legislature had considered over 300 pieces of legislation, "raising taxes by 1.3 billion dollars."

\$1.3 billion is in fact the budget shortfall the state faces this year. Actually, the state cut spending by \$2.2 billion and, through the elimination, suspension or limitation of tax credits, would raise a projected \$148.2 million over the next two years. Due to the TABOR amendment, any tax increase must go to the voters as a ballot initiative.

The only tax approved by the governor during the past year was a mandate to collect Colorado's existing sales tax from out-of-state online retailers, with an estimated \$4.7 million in revenues projected for this year.

Brown continued with statements that are often staples of Tea Party speeches and Internet legends. Regarding the student loan provision in the health care reform act he said, "They're going to take over all student loans ... now, I wonder why? They want to control our kids."

What that provision did, in fact, was remove third-party lenders from the process, for an estimated \$61 billion in savings over 10 years.

Brown also pointed to a provision in the act that would activate 6,000 medical workers and emergency responders in the event of a national emergency. "Section 5210 established a ready reserve corps. That's Obama's private army."

Speaking to one of the Tea Party's biggest issues — gun rights — Brown said, "Can you imagine what Barack Obama would do if we didn't have guns? No telling what he'd do; this guy's after power, let me tell you, and they want to take away our guns.

"Hillary Clinton is talking about a treaty with the U.N. to do exactly that," Brown continued, referring to a United Nations small arms treaty agreed upon last fall. Setting international standards for the import, export and transfer of conventional weapons, the treaty would allow nations to remain in charge of arms export control arrangements, but would legally oblige countries to follow terms set forth in the treaty.

"I tell you what I know, that you guys will stand right with me. It's going to be civil war when they try to do that," Brown added, his statement met with a loud, "Amen!" and applause.

"The United Nations is not going to tell us what to do with our guns and they're not going to with our land, and they're trying to do that all the time, right now," Brown said.

While the treaty would set controls for the import and export of conventional weapons between nations, the treaty would not subject citizens of one nation to the laws of another. Furthermore, in 2008 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled (in District of Columbia v. Heller) that, "(T)he enshrinement of constitutional rights necessarily takes certain policy choices off the table. These include the absolute prohibition of handguns held and used for self-defense in the home."

system?

- We need more
- It's fine as is
- It's not needed

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In fact, the only gun legislation President Obama has signed while in office expanded gun rights, allowing loaded and concealed weapons in national parks.

Finishing with a tearful reflection on George Washington and his belief that the colonies' victory in the war was the result of "divine providence," Brown took several questions from the audience — all devoid of tax issues. Likewise, when Archuleta County Republican candidates followed Brown with brief introductions, only Bob Hart (running for county commissioner) was asked a tax question — and one in relation to an alleged mistake made by the county on property tax (to which the audience member claimed the county had not refunded).

Hart was the only local candidate who took questions, the most compelling being the relationship of Hart's company with the county. Hart responded by stating his company only had one current contract with the county (snow removal at the airport) with one year left on that contract and promised, if elected, his company would cease doing business with the county while he was in office.

While the Archuleta County Tea Party attendees did not engage in rowdy behavior or fiery rhetoric, they did show themselves to be a formidable and energized bloc in the run-up to the mid-term elections. However, it remains to be seen how a packed room in April will translate into a march to the polls in November.

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