

DFL governor hopefuls talk American Indian issues at forum

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By: [Brad Swenson](#), Bemidji Pioneer

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The candidates talked about tribal sovereignty, American Indian gaming, the environment, health care and more before about 150 people in traditional native circles on Thursday night in an American Indian issues forum on the Bemidji State University campus.

Senate Taxes Committee Chairman Tom Bakk of Cook cut to the chase with his opening remarks:

“If I am governor, the state is not going to expand gaming in Minnesota,” he said to a round of applause. “I have seen the tremendous benefit that gaming has brought to the Bois Forte Band, and Indian Country where I live is different today and more prosperous and has more opportunity than when I grew up.”

The state doesn’t belong in the gaming business, said Bakk, referring to several Republican efforts in recent years to create “racinos” or video gambling in bars.

Former U.S. Sen. Mark Dayton spoke more of party politics and recalled a 1982 Bemidji House race in which the endorsed candidate, Larry Kitto, an American Indian, was challenged. At the time, Dayton was running for U.S. Senate.

Kitto “earned the right to be elected and he was challenged by a white man ... and the DFL candidate for governor and the DFL candidate for lieutenant governor refused to be seen photographed or appear with Larry in that race, because of the racism that existed,” said Dayton. “Two of us stood with Larry and went to events, stood with him all the way — our state auditor candidate Paul Wellstone and the other was myself.”

Dayton added that “in the same way, I will stand with those who are elected as the sovereign leaders of sovereign nations, your tribal leaders, and work with you as co-equal heads of state on behalf of the issues that affect all Minnesotans.”

The venue included Minnesota House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher, former House Minority Leader Matt Entenza, former Sen. Steve Kelley, Sen. John Marty, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, Rep. Tom Rukavina and Rep. Paul Thissen.

Ramsey County Attorney Susan Gaertner was the lone missing Democrat, while no Republicans showed even though organizers say they were as well invited.

They each made opening statements and then rotated from circle to circle, each one having a specific issue question to ask the candidates.

“As your governor, I will work with you, and work with the heads of government on a government-to-government relationship on equal terms,” said Kelliher, who touted her efforts on bills to fund Ojibwe and Dakota language preservation.

Kelliher said she’s ordered an “Indian Law 101” program each year for legislators, now in its fourth year. “We’ve expanded the debate from just gaming, which has brought incredible prosperity to our state ... to other issues.”

Those issues include protecting the genetic purity of natural wild rice and the native language preservation. As governor, Kelliher said she would appoint a tribal member as a liaison from the governor’s office.

Rukavina said he has fostered American Indian interests for the 23 years he’s been in office, and always has an open door, “to the Indian leaders and the rank-and-file as well.”

As governor, he’d have an American Indian on his “kitchen cabinet,” he said. “You come to me anytime you want, tell me what I’m doing right, what I’m doing wrong.”

He “made sure” three years ago that state funding went to Ojibwe language programs at the University of Minnesota-Duluth and Dakota language at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

“If you don’t preserve your language, you don’t to me have culture,” Rukavina said. He noted his grandparents homesteaded on Bois Forte Reservation land.

Rybak, too, cited a family connection as his parents ran a drug store at the corner of Franklin and Chicago avenues in Minneapolis.

“From that moment to the moment I became a mayor of the city of Minneapolis, with the largest American Indian population of any city in the country, I’ve been equally involved in all of these issues,” Rybak said. “One of the greatest things about being governor of Minnesota is that you have the ability to have partnerships with incredible Indian communities.”

There are disparity issues that must be attacked by the next governor, he said, but “there are more important opportunities with the fact that this state has never celebrated the Indian communities that are so much about who we are.”

Entenza said that as a young lawyer, he represented American Indian spearfishers in Wisconsin during the volatile expansion of fishing under treaty rights in the 1980s.

“I’m going to be the governor who leads for all people, because we need respect between us and plan to move the state and your nations forward to everyone’s benefit,” Entenza said. He also cited the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as saying, “We need fewer creeds and more deeds.”

When he started his campaign, Entenza said he met with tribal leaders at Red Lake, Leech Lake and White Earth nations.

Rebuilding Minnesota won’t be done in the State Capitol but with each other, said Thissen. “One of the most important ones is with the state and the tribes. To me, that’s focusing away from where we’ve been ... and focusing more importantly on things that we share in common.”

It's important "that we treat each other with equality," said Marty. "Every one of us was created as a human being with dignity and deserve respect — even when we're sick, even when we're vulnerable, even when we're poor."

Everybody should have access to health care, a chance to earn a living wage, he said. Tribal sovereign governments need to be treated with respect. "That's the way we start, and then we can work on a joint agenda."

Billed as the first-ever statewide American Indian issues gubernatorial forum, the event was sponsored by Native Vote Alliance of Minnesota, American Civil Liberties Union-Minnesota's Greater Minnesota Racial Justice Program, Wellstone Action Fund's Native American Leadership Program and TakeAction Minnesota/The ReNEW Minnesota Campaign.

The event, held at the American Indian Resource Center on campus, was preceded by an Indian taco supper.