

Taft: The task is ahead for new governor

by Paul E. Kostyu

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Flanked by two former Ohio Democratic governors on Sunday, Republican Bob Taft suggested Ohio's new Democratic governor should be asked how his administration plans to solve the state's problem with school funding.

Republican Bob Taft Taft said it with a straight face, but slowly a big grin came to his face. In the meantime, former Gov. Richard F. Celeste rushed to Gov. Ted Strickland's defense.

"Since the three of us flunked that test, it's unfair to suggest," he said.

Taft, who left office in January after two terms, later complimented efforts by Strickland to improve pre-school education.

The exchange was just part of the give-and-take at a two-hour session sponsored by Cleveland State University. It brought three former governors, which also included John J. Gilligan, together to talk about state government. Former governor and now U.S. Sen. George Voinovich was invited, but couldn't attend.

That left Taft to fend for himself as the sole Republican on the panel, which included moderator Patrick A. Sweeney, a former long-term Ohio Democratic legislator.

The interplay between the three former chief executives was cordial and good-natured, though there was some tension in the room as they reminisced about their time in office.

When asked about the quality of their staffs, all three said a governor should have a strong chief of staff. Without naming Brian Hicks, Taft said he had such a person and delegated a lot of responsibilities him. But Taft didn't directly talk about Hicks' or his convictions for ethics violations.

"How do you get your (cabinet) departments to tell the truth," asked Thomas Suddes, a former statehouse reporter for The Plain Dealer who also moderated the panel.

"For the most part you have to have good trust in the system," Taft said.

"The executive will be betrayed by those they put in a position of authority," said Gilligan, who was governor from 1971 to 1975. "If they defend them, then they get tarnished by the same broad brush."

Taft later said he wished he had followed the adage "trust but verify" when dealing with state agencies, in particular the Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation. A scandal involving bureau investments ensnared Taft and aides in ethics problems.

"In hindsight, we were getting glowing reports and I wish we would have dug into them earlier," he said. "There were flaws in the system because the state deferred too much to (the bureau's) three main interest groups — organized labor, businesses and trial lawyers."

Celeste, governor from 1983 to 1991, suggested the bureau had problems "because it's been treated as patronage system." He suggested an external evaluation, similar to those done for colleges, be put in place for the bureau, lottery and other agencies to get regular critical reports.

The three governors spent a lot of time talking about education, agreeing the state's colleges and universities need to do a better job working together and eliminate duplication.

Additionally, Taft said the challenge in Ohio is getting "more students to aspire for higher education."

Celeste, now president of Colorado College, said students have to challenge themselves to do better.

"Access is critical," he said, but agreed with Taft that it makes sense to have a program that studies polymers at the University of Akron and urban studies at Cleveland State, but not at both. He suggested high schools guarantee a student is ready for college and pay for the remedial costs should a college discover the student isn't prepared.

"That's radical," he said, "but I'm not running for office."

Gilligan, a member of the Cincinnati Board of Education, worried about the "huge divide in our society between the affluent and those who are not making it. The divide is getting wider.

"We have to solve the problem of getting students to school, attracting them and keep them in."

He said 40 percent of the students in the Cincinnati schools rely on free or reduced lunches and 50 percent come from single-parent households.

"We need to educate them that they can be contributing members of society," he said. "It's a public education process."

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