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Oregon gubernatorial candidates, from left, Tina Kotek, Christine Drazaan (via video) and Betsy Johnson address the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston on Friday, June 17, 2022.

Candidates for governor address potential voters

BY ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

Oregon's three gubernatorial candidates took the stage Friday, June 17, at the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston and spoke of lessons from the pandemic, crossing the urban/rural divide and how they would make the state better.

Tina Kotek, Democrat, and Betsy Johnson, unaffiliated, were in person, while Republican Christine Drazaan appeared via prerecorded video. The trio shared the spotlight on the second day of the conference and answered the same set of questions.

WHY RUN FOR GOVERNOR?

Kotek, speaker of the Oregon House of Representatives, 2013-22, spoke of her parents. They were immigrants, she said, who taught her values including thriftiness and giving back to society. The Democratic nominee also mentioned her sports background.

"I want to be your team captain," she said. Having moved to the state in 1987, she fell in love with it right away, she said. She liked the look of Oregon, and loved the potential.

In the years that followed, she worked for the Oregon Food Bank. As such, she said, she traveled to all parts of the state and got to know people throughout.

Since then, working in the state House, she made an effort to identify and solve problems, she said.

Drazaan, Oregon representative from Canby 2019-22, said she is motivated by values taught to her in her childhood.

The Republican nominee said she was taught in her youth that politicians mattered, but they frequently made things worse for their constituents.

When she started working in government, she said, she wanted to shoulder the burdens of other people. As she did so, she discovered that serving under Democratic rule was not altogether great.

"Single-party control has led to us being on the wrong course," she said.

She added she wants to restore balance, thereby returning government to the people.

"We have the opportunity for change," she said.

She said her opponents had their chance, but they are the ones who are responsible for getting us "to where we are" now.

Johnson served as an Oregon state senator 2005-21 and a state representative before that and ran as a Democrat. But her bid to take Mahonia Hall has her running an unaffiliated campaign.

"I'm going to be on your side," she said.

Johnson said Gov. Kate Brown has taken the state in the wrong direction, and voting for Kotek would be "validating the status quo," and that would

make things even worse.

Johnson spoke of often finding herself at odds with her party and annoying her colleagues. She said Oregon needs more moderates in government, and she wants to be governor so she can employ ideas from both major parties.

WHAT IS THERE TO DO ABOUT THE URBAN/RURAL DIVIDE?

Addressing the separation between people in bigger and smaller cities, Kotek praised the Economic Summit as "a good start" to solving the problem.

"It's nice to be back here in Hermiston," she said.

Kotek said having legislators and politicians visit places away from their homes helps them build relationships. And through those relationships, they can push forward on topics such as wildfire recovery, which needs popular support.

Drazaan said this election is giving rural people an opportunity for respect. In decisions, as with ones relating to COVID-19, state government has given the state a Portland-centric approach.

Johnson spoke of her own history with flying fellow legislators to Eastern Oregon.

"This is not a stop," she said.

By bringing people in government to this side of the state, she said, she is able to educate them on the values and needs here.

WHAT ABOUT THE PANDEMIC AND HEALTH CARE?

The candidates weighed in on the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic and what they might have done differently as governor.

Kotek said there are some important lessons to draw from the pandemic. There were good things about the response, she said. For instance, the state deserves credit for organizing personal protective equipment. There were, however, problems, including communication, she said. Joblessness and people having trouble with rents were other trouble spots relating to the coronavirus.

Drazaan said Oregon, under Brown, led with fear. According to Drazaan, the governor told people that bad things would happen if they didn't do what they were told.

"I will lead with facts and not fear," she said.

She stated there will be wildfires and droughts and problems, but as governor she would empower local communities to do what is right for them and to solve their problems.

Johnson said Oregon should have trusted its people. The mandates were, she said, "heavy handed." Often, she said, decisions were made without the consult of affected people. Also, the system needs an "overhaul," she said, so we can know who is respon-

sible for decisions and hold them accountable.

All three candidates praised Oregon's system of coordinated care organizations, though Drazaan stated the system needed protection from becoming "a shadow of its former self."

HOW WILL YOU KNOW YOU WERE A GOOD GOVERNOR?

For the final question, each candidate addressed what she wanted to accomplish and how they would know they were successful after being governor.

Kotek said she would like to be remembered for bringing people together to solve problems, including the need for more housing.

Drazaan stated she wants to be the person who cleans up the "mess" Oregon is in now and keep people from wanting to leave.

Johnson said she wants to be the person who makes the state less divided and more unified.

Also, she said, she wants to solve homelessness throughout the state, reduce crime and make Oregon more affordable. She spoke of the state's need to address its housing supply problem and restore respect to business.

She added she wants to restore the "maverick spirit" of Oregon. Bold, new leadership that seeks the middle of our political divide is key to rejuvenating the "Oregon mojo," she said.

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