

## Candidates face tough questions, hard choices in Colorado gubernatorial debate

Denver Business Journal - by [Ed Sealover](#)

Colorado's three leading gubernatorial candidates came under their fiercest debate questioning of the campaign season Monday, with American Constitution Party candidate Tom Tancredo issuing the most specific ideas on cutting state spending and other topics.

Two former governors -- Democrat Richard Lamm and Republican Bill Owens -- served as the hosts of the Elevate Colorado forum, and they prodded and sometimes argued with the candidates in a series of two-on-one interviews in front of some 400 people. Eleven chambers of commerce and two industry groups sponsored the forum, held at Infinity Park in Glendale.

Questions varied between the three candidates, but the one universal topic concerned the state budget and how the next governor would be able to close a projected \$1.1 billion shortfall in the upcoming fiscal year.

Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, the Democratic nominee, said he would seek advice from business and nonprofit leaders and would look for ways to bring about efficiencies in running state government. When asked for specifics, he left the door open to cuts in education, transportation and even health care, saying: "This might be one of the first times we've ever had to cut back and make it harder to get on Medicaid."

Evergreen businessman Dan Maes, the Republican nominee, reiterated that he would look to consolidate some departments and eliminate 2,000 jobs, though he did not specify where those cuts would come. When asked about what state spending he considered excessive, he cited electronic roadside signs that warn drivers about weather conditions.

Tancredo, the former Republican congressman, laid out more concrete ways that he would change the structure of state government. Those included:

- Rolling back recent expansions of Medicaid eligibility and turning the Medicaid system into essentially a contributor to participants' health savings accounts, which he said could save \$158 million;
- Requiring state college professors now teaching 13 credit hours per week to teach 50 instead, an efficiency he claimed could save some \$50 million;
- Freezing cost-of-living adjustments to the Public Employees' Retirement Association (PERA) for seven years and setting up a system for all new hires that is a defined-contribution plan rather than a defined-benefit plan, saving \$400 million;
- Offering vouchers to low-income Denver Public Schools students at values of 75 percent of the average cost to educate each student now, saving an undetermined amount.

Tancredo's comments brought this response from Lamm: "You've put more things of substance on the table, and I really admire it."

The two former governors got combative at times with the candidates about their answers as well.

Owens took hardest after Tancredo, arguing that PERA fixes are not part of the state's general fund and would not alleviate the budget crisis -- a statement Tancredo fought by saying that the cost of propping up the insolvent system fell to the general fund.

The former Republican governor also disputed Tancredo's assertions that the federal government cut spending by 10 percent in the early 1980s when Tancredo worked for the U.S. Department of Education.

Lamm prodded Hickenlooper to give examples of where, as he's said, state regulation is too great, and Hickenlooper responded by citing a regulation requiring oil and gas drillers to inject water back into rock formations, which he claimed isn't necessary in all basins.

Lamm also asked repeatedly if Hickenlooper would repeal the 2007 executive order that let state employees to unionize and mandates the state to set aside money in their paychecks to be paid to unions as dues.

"We will include it in the process of looking at every executive order, as every governor should do, and determine whether it had a positive or negative impact," Hickenlooper said. But he added: "If we're going to try to get the economy in this state turned around, we

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need organized labor, we need business, we need everybody working together.”

Owens, meanwhile, chided Maes on his statements that he would save money by eliminating some electronic highway signs, saying: “That has nothing to do with the structural deficit of the state.”

He also pressed Maes on whether he’d ever fought for a conservative cause before beginning his gubernatorial campaign. The GOP candidate responded that he’d volunteered in a Jefferson County treasurer’s race in 1994 and had fought for faith issues as an elder of his church, but added that he spent much of his time earlier in his career concentrating on running businesses.

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