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Rep. Tom Bennett hosts sometimes raucous town hall meeting



A baker's dozen of area residents met with state Rep. Tom Bennett Thursday to talk about multiple topics in a sometimes freewheeling town hall meeting.

Bennett kicked off the 90-minute meeting at Hoopeston City Hall saying he wanted to listen to what constituents wanted on issues ranging from legalized marijuana to school safety to Illinois' financial problems.

Illinois Rep. Tom Bennett, (R-106) lists points being considered as part of school safety requirements during a town hall meeting Thursday in Hoopeston.

Hoopeston resident Emery Zimmerman, had a list of topics he wanted to cover, starting with teacher pensions.

"What did they do with the money," he asked, of tax dollars property owners already paid for pensions.

Bennet explained that Illinois, which is about \$130 billion in pension debt, is looking at ways to fix the problem, including retaining responsibility for existing pension debt but shifting future pension costs to school districts.

A former teacher, Bennett outlined how districts boost the salaries of teachers by six percent for three years before they retire to increase their pensions, a perk districts may not continue if they have to fund it.

If districts have to shoulder their own pension costs, "we have to find some way to cut property taxes," Bennett said.

Another idea being kicked around is taxing retirement. Illinois is one of only three states that doesn't tax retirement benefits, Bennett said.

Adam Taubert, pastor of First Baptist Church of Hoopeston, said conservatives "have to find a way to control the message" and that education is more important than many other issues being discussed.

Taubert steered his comments into a discussion of a bill that, if passed, would mandate teaching Illinois grade and high school students LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) history, including societal contributions of LGBT people.

The bill passed the Illinois Senate, 34-18 on May 2, with local state Sen. Jason Barickman voting in favor of it.

Citing a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) in the LGBT community, the divorce rate of the same group, as well as biblical prohibitions, Taubert wondered how God can bless Illinois under the circumstances.

If Illinois mandates the teaching, Taubert said, "Fine, also give a section on Christianity."

Retired kindergarten teacher See BENNETT on other side



Adam Taubert, pastor at First Baptist Church of Hoopeston, discusses a bill that would mandate teaching LGBTQ history to grade school students in Illinois.

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Photo contributed

Retirees get together

Hoopeston Area retirees gathered May 2 for a retirement tea at Maple School. Combined, the guests had a total of 1,077.5 years of service to the district. Those attending and their years of service include, front from left, Julie Hughes (38), Joyce Cottingham (18.5), Dick Forshier (33), Gene Hanson (30), Beverly Overbey (40), Susie Brown (35), Judy Voorhees (40), Elsie Hofbauer (21), Sherry Johnson (27.5), Kay Brown (29), Anna Whiteman (20.5); middle, Supt. Suzi Hesser, Donna Eells (20), Debbie McBride (21), Priscilla Lobb (20), Roberta Maudlin (19), Sheila Browne (20), Diane Swartz (25), Sandra Preston Markou (35), Nita Lockhart (21), Terry Silver (32), Janet Brewer (35), Chris Newman (39); and back, Gwen Bandy (40), Gloria Jahn (26), Janet Crouch (38), Kathy Butterworth (40), Carolyn Eyrich-Mastin (33), Marsha Lewis (21.5), Jean Drollinger (26.5), Brenda Crusinberry (25), Leona York (30), Dave Christin (30), Red Wallace (6.5), Greg Anvick (33), Ron Lewis (31.5) and Larry Jahn (38).

Bennett continued from other side

Carolyn Looker, of Milford, said teaching heterosexual or homosexual issues “does not have a place in the school.” Regarding legalizing marijuana, most of those attending were against that. “The state would get more money but at what cost,” Looker asked. Bennett shared date from states which have legalized pot which shows an increase in crime, accidents and medical expenses. Al Zawarus, of Hoopeston, had a different take on it, talking about how stressed and angry people seem to be these days and how marijuana could help. “I’d think governments would want their population to be mellow and cool,” he said. While Bennett said the push to legalize pot in Illinois is getting stronger, “I’m not ready to throw the flag up yet.” The Valentine’s Day school shooting at a Florida school

has state and school officials thinking about school safety. Bennett said legislators are talking about things like behavioral threat assessment, reporting between schools and law enforcement about student threats, tip lines to report possible violence and hardening schools to keep intruders out. One superintendent in Bennett’s district thinks trained armed teachers might be a good plan but that idea got a cool reception from most locals, including Hoopeston Area Supt. Suzzette Hesser. Hesser said the district just finished active shooter AL-ICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate) training, which gives useful information on getting students away from the situation, rather than sheltering in place. “The whole idea is we don’t have to hide anymore,” she said.

Hoopeston Police Department worked with the schools on the training, she added. Aside from training, Hesser said the best way to cut down on violence is to know the students and their families. “Then you have a safer school,” she said. She also announced that next year, two mental health counselors will be available for the high and middle schools, which currently share one counselor. Asked about gun rights, Bennett said several gun bills are in the legislature. “That’s why this election in November is so very, very, very important,” he said.

Weather

Sunny today. High 79. Tonight, mostly clear. Low 52. Tomorrow, chance of thunderstorms. High 77, low 60.

From the Blotter

A single key was found Sunday at McFerren Park. The owner may identify and claim it at the police station.

Court Dispositions

April 5

Bradley S. David, Hoopeston, found guilty by default to criminal damage to property, fined \$200; status hearing May 3. Tonya Edwards, Hoopeston, found guilty by default of restraint of dogs by owner, fined \$380; status check May 3. Ray Williams, Hoopeston, case continued for further enforcement. Nichole Hansen, Hoopeston, status check May 3.

Classifieds

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