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S. Carolina candidates debate health care fixes

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COLUMBIA --- Five gubernatorial hopefuls on Friday promoted their ideas to guide South Carolina out of its economic crisis, meet health care challenges and address the state's cigarette tax.

Participating in the forum, sponsored by the South Carolina Hospital Association, were Democrats Dwight Drake, Jim Rex and Vincent Sheheen, and Republicans Andre Bauer and Henry McMaster.

When asked how to solve the problem of emergency rooms being used as holding areas for the mentally ill, the candidates pitched plans from tort reform to raising awareness and gathering experts.

"I've heard descriptions of people who have been dumped by law enforcement and others in emergency rooms and have sat there for days and in some cases weeks," said Rex, the state superintendent of education.

"This is something we need to address now," he added, suggesting raising the cigarette tax and making sweeping tax reforms.

McMaster, the state's attorney general, pointed to his role in fighting to let the state Department of Mental Health keep the revenue from the sale of its buildings.

McMaster pushed tort reform to shield hospitals and emergency rooms from liability when people are turned away.

Drake, a Columbia attorney and former lobbyist, acknowledged he didn't know the scope of the problem posed by the state's mentally ill until he started campaigning. He said that as governor he would raise awareness and tap health care workers and the other parties involved to devise a long-term strategy.

Bauer, the lieutenant governor, pitched a similar plan of gathering the affected groups, including law enforcement.

Sheheen, a Democratic state senator from Camden, opposed further mental health agency budget cuts.

Drake said the cash-strapped state should consider cutting state employees' pay and releasing nonviolent prisoners early to cut prison costs.

McMaster stressed lowering taxes to attract business. Rex pointed to the \$240 million in new revenue he said would come from his proposal to raise the cigarette tax.

Bauer took aim at across-the-board budget cuts and lawmakers who want to fund some state programs, specifically the S.C. Conservation Bank, despite current fiscal struggles.

On the topic of what to do with the Palmetto State's lowest-in-the-nation cigarette tax, Rex and Sheheen called for it to be raised to the national average of \$1.34, while Drake said only a 50-cent hike was politically feasible. McMaster rejected any increase, and Bauer said he could support raising it, if it resulted in lower income taxes and job creation.

Though absent on Friday, the rest of the gubernatorial field includes: U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett, a Republican representing the 3rd congressional district, state Sen. Robert Ford, D-Charleston, state Rep. Nikki Haley, R-Lexington, and Democrat Mullins McLeod, a Charleston attorney.
