

# Jefferson legislators meet with residents

November 23, 2014

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SHEPHERDSTOWN-Four local members of the West Virginia Legislature met with residents of Jefferson County for breakfast and discussion at the Bavarian Inn at the League of Women Voters's Breakfast with Legislators on Saturday.

Delegate Stephen Skinner (D- 67th), Delegate-elect Jill Upson (R-65th), Senator Herb Snyder (D-16th) and Delegate Paul Espinosa (R-66th) fielded questions and listened to comments from their constituents relating to library funding, mental health and substance abuse in the Eastern Panhandle, campaign funding, legislative priorities and net neutrality, among other items.

One of the most-discussed topics throughout the discussion was the lack of a mental health and substance abuse rehabilitation facility in the Eastern Panhandle, even though there is a need for one.



Journal photo Mary Stortstrom

Delegate-elect Jill Upson answers questions from citizens of Jefferson County at a breakfast at the Bavarian Inn in Shepherdstown on Saturday. The panel discussion was hosted by the local chapter of the West Virginia League of Women Voters.

Espinosa said he recently learned from a Maryland State Police officer at a Quad State Legislative Forum that more than 50 percent of criminal activity in Maryland is drug-related. He said substance abuse is "a big issue" in the region.

Snyder said the nearest mental health facility in West Virginia is in Raleigh County. Snyder said he believes West Virginia's government is trying to get out of funding mental health programs because it's expensive, but said there is Medicaid expansion funding that could be an incentive.

"We need a mental health facility somewhere in the Eastern Panhandle, and we're seeing some movement in that direction," Snyder said. "Medicaid dollars are the carrot on the stick that's going to bring it here."

Skinner said he agreed with Snyder's comment that mental health treatment is one of the most important revenue streams in West Virginia's Medicaid expansion. Skinner said he would like to see support for a mental health facility through private funding as well as public.

Upson said she would be willing to work with all concerned parties to improve mental health treatment in the Eastern Panhandle.

Tom Trumble, director of the Jefferson County Health Department, gave a comment from the audience related to substance abuse.

"Drug abuse and mental health are the biggest health problem in Jefferson County," Trumble said. "The restrictions on the sale of Oxycontin drove the prices of prescription drugs up so much that kids are using heroin. There were 50 deaths from heroin overdoses in Berkeley County and Jefferson County this year."

Another recurring topic of discussion was the identification and funding of priority items by the legislature.

Snyder said it is difficult to set priorities with limited resources (funding), but the focus needs to be on policy more than priority.

Espinosa said he wanted to select priorities that would make West Virginia more competitive with surrounding states in its economy and education.

"I want to implement meaningful tax reform that will make our state more competitive. If you get more businesses here, you grow the tax base," Espinosa said. "I want to increase funding for items like transportation, libraries, education and public safety and I support policies that improve the economic climate in the state."

Skinner said the state's financial resources could be in jeopardy, which could negatively impact the business climate in the state.

"I've been hearing from the other (panelists) that there is about \$290 million less available than what's in the budget. I think it could be more than that, and we're in trouble. When we're using the rainy day fund to support the budget, that hurts you (the citizens), and we're not seeing any movement in West Virginia with new businesses," Skinner said.

Upton compared setting priorities as a legislator to setting priorities and financial planning in a family.

"It's difficult when you have to make cuts. I know many of us have had to do it in our personal lives. The question was, 'How do you set priorities when you represent other people?' Well, I think today is a start. You start by hearing everyone's voices."

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization that works to promote political responsibility through informed and active citizens involvement in government. The League does not support or oppose any political party or candidate, and despite its name, is open to male members.

For more information about the League of Women Voters of West Virginia, including upcoming forums, visit [www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org).

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