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Environment pushed aside in campaign, forum says

Economy dominating race for N.J. governor

By DEREK HARPER, Statehouse Bureau, 609-292-4935 | Posted: Wednesday, September 23, 2009 |

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP - In a race revolving around unemployment and the economy, candidates for governor have not played up the environment, panelists said at a Monday evening forum at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

Panelist Ed Rodgers, environment reporter for the New Jersey Network, quoted a Gallup poll over the summer that found state residents considered economic growth a greater priority than the environment by 51 percent to 42 percent.

Sharon Schulman, executive director of Stockton's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, chaired the discussion and pointed to a Zogby International poll released last week of people living in southern New Jersey that found only 2 percent of the 601 registered voters considered the environment to be in their top two concerns.

Regardless of who wins office, panelists pointed out that the candidate will take office in gloomy economic times with limited economic resources.

Michael S. Rodriguez, a Stockton assistant political science professor, said his efforts looking through the candidates' Web sites found varied responses.

Chris Daggett, a former EPA administrator mounting an independent bid, seemed to spell out the issues in greatest detail. Gov. Jon S. Corzine listed what he said were his accomplishments, but Rodriguez said he had to dig to find them. He said Republican challenger Chris Christie seemed to strongly support shore protection, but for economic reasons: the beaches are the basis for the state's multibillion shore tourism economy.

Candidates have agreed on some points. Rodgers said all three support finding a stable source of

open-space funding over periodically issuing bonds, but none has said specifically how to do that.

Matt Elliot, with Environment NJ, said his organization found candidates reluctant to talk about the environment. The group ultimately decided not to endorse a candidate.

It is unfortunate, he said later, because there is interest.

He pointed to a recent town hall event in Westfield, Union County, that the group hosted. It reserved a 90-person room at a library, but with more than 120 people it was standing room only. Daggett and surrogates for the two other candidates fielded questions for three hours.

Tuesday's panel discussion was jointly held with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy and the Hall Institute of Public Policy. It is one of several public-policy discussions the Hall think-tank is holding around the state. A crowd of about 50 people, who appeared to be mostly undergraduates, attended.

It was the first of six events the Hughes center is hosting during the school year.

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