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## 18th District race targets spending

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### STAFF REPORT

As in nearly all of the state's electoral districts, rhetoric in the the 18th Legislative District this campaign season has focused on state spending, and more precisely on how to curb it.

The Senate race in the district, which consists of East Brunswick, Edison, Helmetta, Metuchen, South Plainfield, South River and Spotswood pits New Brunswick attorney and Republican Pat Brown against Democratic incumbent Barbara Buono.

Brown, an attorney who unsuccessfully ran for a seat on the East Brunswick Township Council in 2004, said the state has an obligation to rein in what he terms "runaway spending" and fiscal waste.

Brown said that while neither party is immune to profligate spending, Democrats have for years increased expenditures without regard for budgetary constraints. Government spending, he said, does not reflect priorities.

"If I lost my job today, I wouldn't come home and tell my wife 'We're putting an addition on the house.' But that's what government does," Brown, 32, told a Home News Tribune panel also attended by Buono recently.

Brown is also calling for what he calls a more equitable school-funding process. Some districts, particularly middle-income districts, "don't get their fair share," he said. "There's money in the pot. We just need to distribute it based on need."

Brown also advocates for a dedicated revenue stream for the upkeep and repair of the state's roadways. Like Buono, he would like to see an elected state comptroller with nearly unfettered powers rather than one appointed by — and possibly beholden to — the governor.

While Buono also laments the lack of state fiscal oversight, she called Brown's argument for statewide cuts circular and in some cases irresponsible.

Calling the budget "a moral document," Buono, a key member of the Senate's Budget Committee, nevertheless agreed that state expenditures are often wasteful. But the revenue stream also needs cleaning up, she said.

She said that the multiple state offices responsible for monitoring what the state is owed create counterproductive redundancy and confusion.

"We need to get control over spending abuses," she said. But a critical first step is figuring out how much the state is losing in revenue. Some estimates put the figure at \$5 billion, enough to fund a round new school projects, Buono said.

Buono, a first-term incumbent who openly declares her independence from party colleagues, withdrew support

for a bill she authored creating a state comptroller's office after other Democrats watered down the legislation. Buono, though, is refocusing her efforts on a new legislation, which would call for an elected — and, she hopes, independent — comptroller, who under current law, is to be appointed by the governor.

The Assembly contest features incumbent Assemblymen Patrick Diegnan, D-South Plainfield, and Peter Barnes III, D-Edison, against Republicans Joseph Sinagra and William England.

England, a member of the South River School Board, saying that excessive government spending is crippling the state, would like to see a 5-percent cut in all of the state's departments. Such a move, he said, would oblige managers and department heads to run government more efficiently. Shared services, particularly among school districts, also would trim expenses, he said.

"The solution is cutting spending," England, 51, said.

Sinagra, a 10-year Helmetta councilman, says that legislators and other government officials have helped push up the state debt with extravagant and wasteful spending, the result being an exodus of middle-income families from the state who could not afford an increasing tax burden.

"It's time New Jersey becomes affordable for the taxpayers," Sinagra, 60, said. "The plan we have right now is not working."

Diegnan, a practicing attorney and a longtime law instructor at Middlesex County College first elected to the Assembly in 2002, said the state needs to prioritize and support higher education.

Installing a Cabinet-level higher education secretary would raise the issue's profile, he said.

"We have got to bring some sense of focus and urgency, and we have to support them," Diegnan said of the state's colleges and universities.

Barnes, appointed in March to fill out his father's term when the elder Barnes was appointed as chairman of the state Parole Board, said the Legislature's foremost priority remains property taxes. Still, its intractability makes reaching any workable solution a daunting one.

"It's a complex problem. It's a comprehensive problem," said Barnes, formerly an 11-year Edison councilman.

Other than cutting expenses and installing an elected comptroller, Barnes is suggesting a dedicated, 1-cent sales tax as part of a three-pronged approach to help solve the problem.

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