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Mulvaney, Powers-Norrell debate school vouchers, economic development

By Matt Garfield · & 2008 The Herald

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INDIAN LAND -- Mick Mulvaney and Mandy Powers Norrell renewed their heated state Senate contest Tuesday night at a candidates forum in Indian Land, but the best evidence of the animosity in this race could be found outside in the parking lot.

While the two candidates argued over job creation, education and water rights, someone left fliers under car windshields that accused Norrell of misrepresenting her positions. Titled "The 2 faces of Mandy Norrell-Powers," the fliers listed various quotes from Norrell on one side and portrayals of her policy positions on the other side, including assertions that she supports raising taxes and agrees with making sexual orientation part of South Carolina's anti-discrimination law.

Back inside the debate, Mulvaney wasted little time going on the offensive, using his opening statement to list attacks that have been made against him by opponents.

"So far we've covered the fact that I'm a bad Christian because I mowed the grass on a Sunday," said Mulvaney, a Republican from Indian Land. "I terrorize children. ... Now that we have those critical issues covered, I'm glad we can start talking about the economy and education. I've been talking about these issues for two years."

"I wish I got a rebuttal for the intro," Norrell, a Democrat, replied before the discussion moved on.

A top priority in District 16, which covers Lancaster County and parts of Fort Mill, is addressing Lancaster's 12 percent unemployment rate. Forbes Magazine ran a feature this month ranking the city of Lancaster as the most vulnerable place in the country in light of the economic downturn. The magazine cited the city's 20 percent poverty rate and the fact that only 18.6 percent of the workforce has an associate's degree or higher.

Norrell talked about using the county's agricultural background as a tool for luring green-collar jobs. Mulvaney argued lower taxes are the key to creating jobs.

"I want to let the market decide," Mulvaney said. "I don't want to give businesses an excuse to move to South Carolina. I want to give businesses that are here a benefit. The fairer thing to do is cut taxes for everybody."

No issue burns hotter than school vouchers. Norrell has sought to make it the defining difference in the race.

"Our public schools are not perfect," Norrell said. "But nobody can convince me that taking money away from our public schools and giving it to private schools is the answer."

Mulvaney held up a copy of the school choice bill he supported last year in the House and said it doesn't take any money out of public schools. He has argued that vouchers should be considered as one option for improving South Carolina's low-performing school districts.

"Let's focus on the kids who are not being served," he said. "There are kids getting ready to graduate who have never been in a school that meets state standards. I'm open for all suggestions."

Outside in the parking lot, some people discovered the fliers as they left the forum. A Norrell supporter tried to remove others before they could be seen.

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