

Healey, Diehl Make Pitches, Points In Final Massachusetts Governor Debate

By Chris Lisinski

State House News Service

Democrat Maura Healey plans to fill in the “yes” bubble on a pair of ballot questions dealing with taxes and immigration, while Republican Geoff Diehl will select “no” on the two measures whose fates will be decided by voters on the same day they pick the first new governor in eight years.

The gubernatorial candidates met Thursday for their second and final debate ahead of the Nov. 8 election, sparring over how to blunt the sting of rising energy costs and prepare for a possible COVID-19 surge, and debating just how much power a governor has when Democrats in the Legislature have veto-proof majorities.

Both candidates said cutting taxes would be their first economic focus, and Healey made a point to again voice support for a package of Gov. Charlie Baker-proposed tax cuts the Legislature initially approved but never finalized. They took different stances on whether they might ever seek to undo cuts or impose new tax increases should Massachusetts face an economic crisis and a revenue shortfall.

“Right now we’re seeing a recession, we’re seeing home values drop, we’re seeing major manufacturers leaving our state (like) Raytheon,” Diehl said. “My point is this: we need to make sure that we’ve got the money for the future, but I don’t think the state is ever going to be in a position where we need to raise taxes over the time that I’ll be in office as governor. So no, I don’t anticipate ever raising taxes.”

Healey declined to “commit to particular pledges” one way or the other on a possible future tax increase, saying she would want to wait to see how the circumstances unfold.

“The point right now is to make sure that surplus gets out the door, which long ago I called on the Legislature to do without further delay and I hope those checks are going out soon,” Healey said, referencing the nearly \$3 billion in tax refunds that Gov. Baker is returning in accordance with a 1986 voter law.

Diehl responded by pointing to Healey’s support for a proposed 4 percent surtax on household income above \$1 million, which will appear before voters as Question 1.

“She’s already said she’s going to raise taxes because she wants Question 1 to pass,” Diehl said. “The state has enough money. They don’t need to take any more of your money.”

The Whitman Republican, who previously served as a state representative and was the GOP nominee for U.S. Senate in 2018, said later during the debate hosted by WCVB, WBUR, The Boston Globe and Univision that he plans to vote against the surtax, which supporters say will generate new funding for transportation and education. Healey said she will vote in favor of it.

“This is money that is necessary to support sustained, important revenue for infrastructure, transportation and education,” she said.

Healey, who has served as attorney general since 2015, also said she will vote yes on Question 4, which would maintain a new law allowing Massachusetts residents without legal immigration status in the U.S. to acquire standard driver’s licenses.

“Keep the law. Seventeen other states have it for good reason,” she said. “It’s important for public safety.”

Democrats in the Legislature enacted the measure over Baker's veto. Opponents, backed by the state Republican Party, quickly gathered enough voter signatures to put a repeal referendum on the ballot.

"I'm in favor of the repeal," Diehl said. "It's a Band-Aid to the real problem, which is immigration law. We need to make people citizens in our country and in our state sooner than what's happening right now."

Maintaining a practice that has been marbled throughout their head-to-head race, both Healey and Diehl spent much of the debate trying to tie one another to the two most recent U.S. presidents.

Healey went after Diehl's support for and from former President Donald Trump right away when moderator Ed Harding opened the evening by asking both candidates if they would accept the results of the election regardless of who wins, tying her Republican opponent to Trump's attempts to undermine the 2020 election.

"Absolutely, and look, this is a difference in this race, because my opponent is an election denier. He supports election deniers out there, including most recently last week, when he went on a right-wing radio station the morning after our debate and once again talked about the Big Lie, talked about the election being rigged, talked about Joe Biden not being the legitimate president," Healey said. "Those are the kinds of statements that incited the violence, the attack on the United States Capitol that resulted in injury and death to police officers."

Diehl generated headlines earlier in the race when his campaign declined to comment to The New York Times on whether he would accept the election's results. A few days later, he clarified that he would accept the outcome if there were no signs of irregularities or voting issues and criticized the

line of questioning.

During Thursday's debate, he opened his answer on accepting the election results with the same word as Healey – "absolutely" – while defending the idea of questioning some of the process.

"Of course Joe Biden is our president. My 401(k) and a lot of people's are becoming 201(k)s right now because of it. The fact of the matter is it's okay to question elections," Diehl said. "Hillary Clinton still, I don't think, has accepted the 2016 election. Even our Senator (Ed) Markey says that we have a stolen Supreme Court because of a stolen election. So look, it's okay to say that things like mail-in balloting in certain states may have been handled badly. I ultimately understand that Joe Biden was certified and became our president."

National politics loomed over other major debate topics such as energy prices and abortion access.

Diehl again blamed Healey's opposition as attorney general to natural gas pipeline expansions for rising costs of heating Bay State homes, and called her "one of the drivers of inflation" because she supported Biden.

"He's the one who created a war on energy. We were energy independent. You have created your own war on energy in Massachusetts," Diehl said. "That is the major driver that's costing businesses more money, passing it on to consumers and making it so expensive to run a business, to employ people, and to try to be competitive with other businesses nearby and globally."

During an answer about abortion access, Diehl described one section of a 2020 law known as the ROE Act as "infanticide."

Healey seized on that language.

"The use of the term 'infanticide' is just a rip from the

Trump playbook, an extreme playbook that does not honor or respect a woman who is faced with an incredibly difficult decision. I just find that really wrong,” she said. “I’m committed as governor to do everything I can to stand up and protect the rights of women to protect providers, because Massachusetts stands for and supports ensuring a woman’s access to abortion.”

Diehl said he agreed with the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to overturn Roe v. Wade but recognizes state-level abortion protections as “the law of the land.” He also pivoted to discussing COVID-19 vaccine mandates when asked about health care professionals providing abortion access and pills to out-of-state residents.

“Protecting women is beyond just abortion. There are other issues. There’s issues like my running mate, Leah Allen, a nurse who was fired from her job because she didn’t want to get a vaccine because she was nursing a baby she had just had while she had been working on a COVID ward and did not think that the vaccine – she was worried about the effect on her child,” Diehl said. “We should be protecting those women’s choices as well.”

Responding to Diehl’s comments pledging to respect the state’s existing abortion laws, Healey said, “I just don’t believe that.”

“This is a race where my opponent celebrated when Roe was overturned. He celebrated it. He thinks it’s a good decision and a good idea. He wants to defund Planned Parenthood. He said he wants to jail doctors who provide abortion care,” Healey said. “And it stretches beyond that because there was a time he didn’t believe in contraception for any unmarried woman. This is not who we are, Massachusetts.”

But how much does the governor’s opinion on abortion matter when Democrats in the Legislature have the numbers to muscle

through any bill they want, so long as they can get their full caucus on board? That, too, was a point of contention.

“I don’t think you seem to understand the difference between governor and Legislature,” Diehl said. “The governor enacts the laws or executes the laws that the Legislature passes. As governor, I don’t make the decision on the ROE Act. The Legislature is a Democrat-controlled House and Senate. My estimation is that will be the case for a number of years. There is no way I’m changing that law, so to scare people – I know it’s Halloween. Stop scaring people about abortion.”

“It’s just not true. The governor absolutely has a lot to do in this space,” Healey said a few moments later. “You think about a governor’s administration, what they’re going to do with MassHealth, what they’re going to do with health care, what they’re going to do across a range of agencies that directly intersect on this issue – it’s just not the case that it doesn’t matter who the governor is.”