

Politicians' Question Time

By Aoife McKeever

Members of the business community have grilled local representatives of the four main parties during a Chamber of Commerce Politicians' Question Time.

Dominic Bradley (SDLP), William Irwin (DUP) Danny Kennedy (UUP) and Conor Murphy (Sinn Fein) took the time out from canvassing in field questions on gender inequality in politics, government support to SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises), what the Assembly can do to support people through the difficulties posed by the global recession, the threat to town centres by out-of-town shopping complexes, how to break out of parochial politics and which post-election ministerial portfolio they might have their eye on.

The event was organised by Newry's

Chamber of Commerce and invited members of the business community to question the Newry and Armagh Assembly candidates on matters of concern.

The debate proved lively, with the small audience members asking tough questions from the candidates, while Newry Chamber of Commerce president Conor Patterson chaired the debate.

With Newry and Armagh fielding no female potential candidates from 11 who are standing for election, the candidates discussed whether the issue was one of general political apathy with women, or whether parties were doing enough to encourage female candidates and women in politics in general.

Business issues quickly came to the fore. The audience was concerned about support from their council in relation to enterprise and the issue of the delayed, Review of Public Administration was highlighted.

Sympathetic to the plight of businesses and individuals in light of global recessions, the candidates pledged to

continue to push to reduce the rate of corporation tax, to seek rates relief for town businesses and off-set that by increasing rates for out of town complexes, fight against cuts in the block grant, but also seek to grow the economy, through industries such as tourism, the agri-food sector and environmental sector.

Things became heated over the issue of out-of-town shopping, including the Tesco complex at Banbridge, when Mr Kennedy questioned whether the chamber itself had been "the author of its own misfortune", by pushing for shopping centres in Newry, which had moved the shoppers from the traditional town centre of Hill Street and Monaghan Street, and when Mr Irwin was conflicted over his views of out-of town complexes and the decision of his party minister Edwin Poots on the Banbridge case.

The mood was lightened by a question on which department the candidates would covet post election.



Pictured l-r are: Danny Kennedy, Conor Murphy, Cria Jackson, CEO Chamber of Commerce; Conor Patterson, president Chamber of Commerce; Dominic Bradley, and William Irwin. R1118700



William Irwin, Dominic Bradley, Conor Patterson, Conor Murphy and Danny Kennedy answer questions from the audience. R1118704



Some of the members of the audience who participated in the questions and answers. R1118706

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