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OPINION

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Comment

Tech issue missing in Va. race

Paul R. Lawrence

Virginia gubernatorial candidates Don Beyer and Jim Gilmore are holding an aggressive debate on the issues. Their commercials blitz the airwaves, and their World Wide Web sites are filled with details about their positions.

Opinion polls tell us that the race is dead even. Yet, with all of this going on, why isn't anyone excited about this election?

Yogi Berra, famed baseball personality, may have explained it best when he noted, "It's deja vu, all over again." That's because the key issues being debated this fall -- education and transportation -- are the same key issues the candidates for governor debated in 1993, 1989, 1985 and 1981.

Perhaps enthusiasm for the race has been replaced by feeling of been there, done that. But it's much more than that. Virginia voters are living in a variation of the movie "Groundhog Day," destined to relive the same debate every four years.

This repetition is tiresome, given the exciting changes expected in the new millennium. For voters to understand how either candidate would govern in the new century, they need to discuss issues relevant to the future, not the past. I'd like to hear their views on Virginia and the information age.

Many think Virginia could be the next Silicon Valley. The state is home to 2,450 technology companies, with nearly 1,600 located in Northern Virginia.

While approximately 5 percent of the work force consists of high-tech workers, this sector of the state economy has cooled during the first half of the decade.

Since both candidates promise to expand the state economy, they should have ideas on how to position the commonwealth in the information age.

The state faces a shortage of high-tech workers -- some 19,000 job openings in Northern Virginia alone, according to one estimate. Could the next administration have any effect on this?

One remedy could involve more education, but it can't be more of the same. Training needed to prepare Virginia's students for the information age is woefully inadequate. Most learn more about computers from video games than they do from school. What should be done to teach the skills needed to work in the information economy?

We need only look to Blacksburg to see the possibilities. In this town of 35,000, 40 percent of the population is on the Internet and 62 percent have access to e-mail.

Thanks to Bell Atlantic and Virginia Tech, visitors from around the globe come to this part of southwestern Virginia to learn about the country's most wired town. One justification given to support developing this prototype community was to attract more high-tech businesses to Blacksburg.

I'd like to hear the candidates discuss their views on how they would support an information-based economy in the state. Should the Blacksburg model be supported and expanded statewide? Should all new buildings be wired for the Web? What about tax incentives for companies that wire their existing facilities? Will new schools be wired?

Another issue for Virginia in the 21st century is how state government will be touched by the information age. I want to hear how the candidates will use technology in their administrations. The Internet allows commerce to be conducted from home, 24 hours a day. Shouldn't doing business with the state be just as convenient? During the next administration, will I be able to renew my driver's license via the Internet?

An example of how technology can improve the effectiveness of state government is through its relationship with the private sector. Chrysler Corp. has told suppliers to stop sending information on paper and to use electronic means. By removing the costs associated with handling paper, Chrysler plans to enhance its competitiveness. Will Virginia do the same in the next century?

If technology is properly harnessed by government, it should reduce the cost of running the state.

In the 19th century, politicians debated how the railroad would change the state economy. In its day, the railroad was the state's physical infrastructure, supporting commerce. Today, candidates debate education and transportation, the infrastructure of Virginia's economy in the 1980s.

If Virginia's economy in the 21st century is to be focused on information, we will need a technology infrastructure. The next governor could have much influence on if and how this happens. Candidates should tell us more about their views on this important subject.

Paul R. Lawrence is a partner in the consulting and accounting firm of Price Waterhouse in Arlington.

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