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Notes from editor (not for publication):

I don't think Amy Howlett paraphrased the exchange particularly well or accurately, so I did some work on it. Hope that's ok.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

Lieutenant governor hopefuls debate in Bellows Falls

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Charlestin, Gray, and McLaren discuss housing,
healthcare, data centers, and other statewide issues

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

The Windham County Democratic Committee hosted a
debate of the three Democratic candidates for lieutenant
governor on July 9 at the Masonic Temple in Bellows Falls.

Moderated by Amy Howlett and Denny Harty, the 90-
minute debate featured candidates Esther Charlestin, Molly Gray,
and Ryan McLaren.

11 The candidates were given prepared questions for the
12 first half hour of the debate, then the majority of the time was
13 spent answering questions from the 35 to 40 members of the
14 audience.

15 The [debate was streamed live](#) on local [FACT-TV](#), where it
16 is still available to watch.

17 **Candidates introduce** 18 **themselves**

19 Charlestin, daughter of Haitian immigrants, is a first-
20 generation American and an educator with two master's degrees.
21 She said she was not raised in Vermont but moved here to raise
22 her children, now 11 and 8, and in doing so "found my real
23 family."

24 She said she grew up a "conservative Christian" and has
25 left those values "far behind me."

26 "Let me tell you," she said. "The life I've been able to
27 create here is amazing. [My children] are kind, sweet, thoughtful
28 individuals, and I have Vermont to thank for that, as well as my
29 mama and myself. I am also grateful for my partner, Jesse, and
30 give him a shout out."

31 In 2024, Charlestin was the Democratic nominee in the
32 gubernatorial race against popular Republican incumbent Phil
33 Scott. In the general election Scott won over 73% of the votes,
34 the best Republican showing since 1946.

35 Prior to running for governor, Charlestin was elected to
36 the Middlebury Selectboard in 2021 and 2022.

37 In 2019, she worked as a residence director at
38 Middlebury College and during the 2022–23 school year served
39 as dean of culture and climate at Middlebury Union Middle
40 School.

41 In 2023, Charlestin founded Conversation Compass, a
42 consulting firm that helps individuals and organizations navigate
43 conversations around culture, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

44 Gray, who has already served one term as lieutenant
45 governor from 2021 to 2023, announced her candidacy for a
46 return to office on Jan. 5, this year. She has since earned the
47 support of over 100 Progressive and Democratic leaders.

48 Gray has served as executive director of the Vermont
49 Afghan Alliance from 2023 to 2026 and as an assistant attorney
50 general from 2018 to 2021.

51 Born and raised on a farm in South Newbury, she lives
52 with her family in Burlington. She said for the past three years she
53 had focused on caring for her new son, taking care of her ailing
54 mother, and working with Afghan refugees in Vermont.

55 “I’ve seen the really deep cruelty and inhumanity of the
56 Trump administration up close,” she said, “and that’s brought me
57 to wanting to run to be able to make sure we have the strongest
58 possible armor in this state to protect fundamental rights, while
59 also delivering for working families and lowering costs.”

60 McLaren, of Essex Junction, grew up in northern
61 Vermont, the son of working-class parents. He talked about his
62 family benefiting from government programs like Dr. Dynasaur
63 and WIC that helped his parents be able to afford to raise a
64 family and even buy a home in Essex Junction.

65 “I’m running right now because while my life was never
66 guaranteed, it was possible,” he said. “It would be virtually
67 impossible for my parents to do that if they were trying to raise
68 kids today.”

69 He said property taxes increasing yearly makes it difficult
70 for families to own even a modest home.

71 McLaren is the former top aide to U.S. Sen. Peter Welch,
72 D-Vt., and announced his candidacy last January. He has not run
73 for or held a state-level position. He has served as an advisor to
74 the commissioner of the Vermont Department of Motor Vehicles.

75 A skiing accident at Mad River Glen in 2017 left
76 McLaren partially paralyzed from the waist down. His condition
77 continues to improve, and he uses both crutches and a
78 wheelchair to get around.

Working with the Legislature

The first question focused on the fact that in Vermont, the lieutenant governor has few day-to-day responsibilities and has limited input into issues. The three statutory roles of the lieutenant governor are presiding over the state Senate when it's in session, sitting on committees, and casting tie-breaking votes when needed.

The candidates were asked how they would handle presiding over and working with the 30 members of the Senate with mutual respect, objectivity, and neutrality, especially with those Senators they disagreed with.

In offering an example of how she would lead, Charlestin said she has worked with clients who were outspoken Trump supporters but who needed her help in dealing with a serious family matter.

She said she needed to put aside any personal opinions and "create a space where we can talk with each other and get to a place of a resolution. I'm happy to announce we did."

"It's not about me," Charlestin said. "It's not about my opinion. It's about how do we move this work forward whether I agree with you or not."

Gray said the question gets at the heart of the lieutenant governor's primary role: serving as president of the Senate. She outlined how that works in day-to-day practice and said she feels that when she held that office during the pandemic, "I think I did it really well.

"It's an extremely important role for building trust" in the Legislature, she said.

Gray said part of the reason she is running again is that "we're going to have a number of new senators next year who don't know the rules and who are going to need a really thoughtful, knowledgeable presiding officer."

McLaren said that building trust when leading a body of people is not a secret. "It's being honest with people, and don't

113 be a jerk. This is a human business. We are in a service business
114 — that means dealing with other people.”

115 He said those qualities were particularly necessary when
116 dealing with “people that you disagree with.”

117 McLaren said this is how he tries to move through the
118 world every day, “with that sort of grace and dignity: [to] treat
119 people the way I want to be treated, and to lead by example.”

120 All three candidates agreed about the importance of
121 making sure that the makeup of legislative committees is fair on
122 all sides and of getting members onto the committees for which
123 they are best qualified.

124 “I don’t care what your politics are,” McLaren said about
125 committee appointments. “I care that you’re ready to act and to
126 make this place livable again for Vermonters.”

127 **What issues matter most?**

128 All the candidates agreed that affordable housing and
129 healthcare top the list of the most important issues facing
130 Vermont, with education and child care important ones as well.

131 Gray made clear that each of these factors affect the
132 others. She pointed out that increasing health insurance costs for
133 educators drives up education costs, which in turn increases the
134 cost of housing through property taxes.

135 Vermont needs a “statewide, urgent, comprehensive
136 strategy to address healthcare,” Gray said, noting that Vermonters
137 pay the highest health insurance premiums in the nation.

138 Part of the answer, Gray and Charlestin agreed, would
139 include “raising taxes on second homes” and noted that a huge
140 percentage of houses in Vermont are second homes.

141 Charlestin said that Massachusetts had done just that, “it
142 brought in millions. It would make a huge difference. Vermonters
143 are house rich and cash poor.”

144 McLaren said he supported extra fees for luxury
145 properties in Vermont. “But Vermont cannot just be a theme park
146 for these people.” He said that a billionaire with a home in Stowe

147 “pays a lower tax rate than probably any of us here. That doesn’t
148 need to happen. We can change it tomorrow.”

149 McLaren also added that hope — or the lack of hope —
150 among Vermonters, is a major factor to address.

151 “I say all the time that my opponent in this race isn’t
152 Molly, isn’t Esther, it is nihilism,” he said. “It is the sense that
153 nothing we do can make a difference, that politics can’t change
154 things.”

155 He added that those who have worked in politics over
156 the last decade or more have “to confront the fact that our
157 inability to act on some of these major challenges — housing and
158 healthcare top of the list — has led to that sense of nihilism, that
159 fear, that anxiety. And it is amplified by a fascist in the White
160 House and the erosion of our democracy nationally. We have
161 work to do.”

162 All three candidates said that their leadership experience
163 — whether in the private sector, in running a business, in
164 supporting political leaders, in working with or in government
165 agencies, and, as in Gray’s case, actually holding elected a state-
166 wide office — has prepared them for the lieutenant governor’s
167 other responsibility of stepping in if the governor is in some way
168 incapacitated.

169 When asked about how they would address the severe
170 impact of climate change in Vermont, including several century-
171 level floods in just the past decade or so, Charlestin said she saw
172 the lieutenant governor’s job as not only showing up when
173 “there’s a crisis, but before a crisis — really understanding what
174 folks need before they need it. Being in communication, being
175 connected.”

176 Gray said that high fuel costs at the moment are driving
177 up the cost of healthcare, education, and housing. Battery storage
178 needs to be increased in Vermont to make better use of the hydro
179 power supplied by Vermont’s contract with Hydro-Quebec and
180 wind and solar sources, making Vermont more energy resilient.

181 She said that's up to Vermont in the years ahead because
182 "the Trump administration, they don't care. They are so extremely
183 reckless."

184 McLaren said that part of the problem is that "we have a
185 culture of no in Vermont" when it comes the most important
186 issues: housing, healthcare, and energy.

187 "We have built up 30 years of bureaucratic crust on the
188 things we say we want the most — affordable healthcare,
189 abundant housing, clean, green, renewable energy. We say no
190 too, too often. It's time for us to walk the walk and say yes to the
191 things that we want."

192 **Saying no to AI centers**

193 With regard to the building of giant AI data centers in
194 Vermont, and encouraging diversified clean energy sources, the
195 candidates were unanimous for a moratorium on huge data
196 centers until we fully understand their impact, while encouraging
197 developing diversified, clean energy sources.

198 McLaren commented that for the past few decades,
199 society has "been running essentially a science experiment on
200 children's brains, addicting them to social media, and all it's done
201 is extract wealth, attention, life from rural communities, and
202 invested it in, like, 10 different billionaires."

203 "They are just sucking our money and our life out of
204 rural communities and taking it away off on private islands and
205 doing whatever the hell they're doing," he continued. "And this is
206 just the next generation of that."

207 He said Vermont needs to fight back against that
208 economic model that has "pulled money and life out of rural
209 communities for 30 years." He noted that AI is run by the very
210 same people.

211 **'Impressive choices'**

212 Attendees commented after the event on how refreshing
213 it was to have a political debate marked by intelligent, informed,

214 polite and respectful discussion, in contrast to the often-vitriolic
215 dialogue of national politics.

216 In the concluding comments, Stuart Brown of the
217 Windham County Democrats acknowledged “the quality of
218 people who have been here tonight. It’s amazing.”

219 “Impressive choices for Democratic lieutenant governor,”
220 Howlett said about the debate.

221 She said her favorite moment of the evening came in the
222 candidates’ response to the question about how they as
223 Democrats would work with Scott, a Republican.

224 “The question presumes we’re going to re-elect Phil
225 Scott,” Gray responded.

226 She praised Scott for his “incredible job” handling the
227 pandemic. But she cited a “healthcare system that is completely
228 imploding,” the governor’s veto of a bill to control prescription
229 drug costs, the crisis in housing, and threats from the federal
230 government to voting rights, immigration, and refugee
231 resettlement.

232 She agreed with McLaren that “we need some vision”
233 and said that if showing up as a partner in addressing those issues
234 “means disagreeing with the governor, if it’s Phil Scott, I will do
235 that respectfully.”

236 But she would prefer either of the two candidates for the
237 Democratic Party nomination, Amanda Janoo or Aly Richards.

238 “We’re going to elect an amazing new woman to the
239 governor’s office,” she said to applause from the audience.

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