

State Legislators, Policy Experts Host Forum on Issue 2

State Rep. Nickie Antonio among panel discussing Issue 2, the referendum on Senate Bill 5, at Rocky River church.

- By [Cory Shaffer](#)
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ROCKY RIVER — In an era of political passion that doubles as incivility, state officials on each side of Issue 2, the referendum on [Senate Bill 5](#), took center pulpit at Rocky River’s [West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church](#) on Monday night in a forum that was passionate, yet respectful.

Panelists – state representatives [Nickie Antonio](#)(D-Lakewood) and [Nan Baker](#) (R-Westlake), [Policy Matters Ohio](#) Executive Director Amy Hanauer and State of Ohio Human Resources Chief [Nicholas Menedis](#) – began by giving a five-minute explanation of their support or opposition of SB 5 to a crowd of about 100 people. “I support a ‘no’ vote on Issue 2,” Antonio said, “because I believe that SB 5 is, as it is presented, unfair, unsafe, and it hurts all of us one way or another if it goes into effect.”

Baker said she is voting yes on the referendum because SB 5, which significantly reforms public employees’ bargaining rights, will save jobs.

“Without adjustment, there will be mass layoffs,” she said. “It’s no exaggeration that Ohio is in a (fiscal) crisis.”

School districts have seen funding levels drop by \$3 billion in this year’s budget, and local governments are dealing with a 25 and 50 percent drop in state funding in 2012 and 2013, respectively.

Menedis, who was appointed by Kasich in January and is voting ‘yes’ on Issue 2, said SB 5 is a tool for local governments to dodge tax increases.

“The public is saying ‘No more taxes,’” he said.

But the \$826 million in savings attributed to SB5 in an April report released by the Department of Administrative Services have been called into question. [According to](#) a Dayton-area school district treasurer,

the state's estimates for his district and four neighboring districts were off by about 400 percent. He said the five combined districts could save \$1.4 million, instead of \$7 million.

Hanauer, of the non-partisan Policy Matters Ohio, said raising taxes would be better policy than dismantling collective bargaining.

"There are \$7 billion in tax loopholes that have gone unexamined," she said, citing the tax break for hiring lobbyists or buying a share in a private jet. "That's almost the whole budget deficit."

She also said states with limited or no collective bargaining rights were facing budget shortfalls slightly larger than states with full rights.

That is one reason Kevin, of Rocky River, is voting no.

"Until 2008, cities had been well off," said Kevin, a firefighter who declined to give his last name. "Collective bargaining had nothing to do with the economic situation we're in right now."

Gaile Schafer of Rocky River said she came in planning to vote no, but now she's not sure.

"I wasn't as well informed as I thought I was," she said. "I'm definitely not going to pay attention to what's on TV."

SB 5 was signed by Gov. John Kasich on March 31. It prohibits all public employees from striking, limits collective bargaining to wages and issues affecting safety, caps employer health care contributions at 85 percent and sick and vacation time, eliminates binding arbitration, abolishes tenure and step increases for teachers and requires merit pay for public employees.

[A poll](#) released last month by Public Policy Polling showed 50 percent of voters support repealing SB5, with 39 percent voting to keep it.

The forum was presented by the church's Social Action Committee, the Rocky River and Lakewood chapters of the [League of Women Voters Cuyahoga Area](#), and [Civic Commons](#).