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Democracy's wheels turn in Green Bay

By Nathan Phelps and Richard Ryman

Forum picks brains of local residents about global issues

Citizens participating in the By The People program Saturday got to the heart of the issues of homeland security and the economy.

How do we know we are safe and winning the war on terrorism, they wanted to know, and how can free trade and globalization be good when it's costing the United States so many high-paying jobs?

Lisa Ann Greatens said she wants to live in a secure country.

"I don't care if President Bush knows a lot about me. I'm not doing anything wrong," the Ashwaubenon resident said during a discussion on individual rights in the post-9/11 world.

But Greatens said she does care if the government is able to keep track of criminals in the country.

The randomly selected delegates weren't always experts on specific issues, but collectively they developed a set of pointed questions that prompted discussion by the panel.

"I don't know much about security, but on the economy, they took my job. I know something here," said delegate Mary Streckenbach of Dyckesville.

Streckenbach lost her job when Emerson Motors closed its Sturgeon Bay plant and moved the jobs to Mexico.

"What is involved is multinational corporations and their interests," said David Newby, president of the state AFL-CIO. "They are exporting First World technology to Third World nations, and we can't compete with that."

U.S. Rep. Mark Green, R-Green Bay, said corporations aren't the only ones at fault for shipping jobs to lower-cost countries.

"The reason why companies are moving offshore is because most consumers here don't care where their goods come from. They want the price," Green said. "Corporations have to respond to the demands of consumers. We also have to look at ourselves and realize we let this happen."

Ismail Shariff, professor of urban and regional studies at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, said the goal of free trade is to reduce economic disparity between nations. He said profits are not inherently bad -- without them, companies do not stay in business.

Green and Newby both said trade agreements should seek to level the playing field so countries are competing on a more equal basis.

Hard-and-fast answers on some of the global issues didn't come easy or with clear definitions.

Fielding questions about the ongoing war in Iraq and national security issues, Green said the war on terrorism is a test of the country's character.

"Do we have the character as a nation to persist as in a war when the visible battles in that war may occur weeks apart, months, years apart," he said. "At what point do we say we're successful? That's what makes this so extraordinarily difficult."

Schneider National CEO Chris Lofgren said he sees progress. "I think we're successful because we choose to go forward and not allow (terrorists) to take away our freedoms. They can inconvenience them, and they have," he said. "If they can't take away the rights we believe in ... then that's how we're successful."

Questions about those gray areas and conflicting ideas bubbled up from the discussion groups to the panel.

It was through these questions and discussions people like Marie Seiler of Green Bay -- a citizen delegate to By The People -- hope they can make a difference.

"You kind of look to see if there is something you can do on your level to make things better," she said at the end of the day.

Source: By the People

Scheduled TV coverage

Broadcasts related to the By the People event will air on WPNE, Channel 38, at the following times:

* Today: 6:30 p.m., repeat of Friday's broadcast of "Here and Now," which included an interview with Jim Lehrer on Saturday's By the People national day of deliberation.

* Thursday: 7 p.m., "In Wisconsin" segment about the event featuring two of the discussion participants.

* Thursday: 9 p.m., national "By the People" PBS special

* Friday: 7 p.m. and 9 p.m., "Here and Now" interviews with area participants about how things went, issues raised and where do they go from here.

* Feb. 1: 6 p.m. repeat of Thursday's "In Wisconsin."

* Feb. 1: 6:30 p.m. repeat of Friday's "Here and Now."

* Feb. 6: 7 p.m. "Here and Now," another set of follow-up interviews regarding topics discussed Saturday.

About By the People

Responses from Saturday's By the People program, produced by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, will be part of a national broadcast. Green Bay is one of 10 communities nationwide participating in the project.

Its main goals are:

- * To debate global challenges facing the United States.
- * To make connections between global issues and local concerns.
- * To help citizens become informed and empowered.

The Greater Green Bay Community Foundation was awarded a grant by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions to host the forum. Other groups, including the Green Bay Press-Gazette, contributed funding.

Preliminary results

Participants' opinions on a number of subjects changed after the day's discussions, according to surveys taken before and after the event:

- * Should the United States be willing to invade other countries that pose a threat? Before the discussions, 51 percent said they disagree strongly or somewhat versus 63 percent afterward.
- * What has been the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement on the U.S. economy? Before the event, 15 percent said it helped a lot or somewhat versus 33 percent afterward.