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## Budget exercise not so simple

**JASON SPENCER, Staff Writer**

GREENVILLE -- The two-hour lesson in hard choices Monday wasn't billed as an election event, but it could end up being the clearest indicator of what one of this year's races could bring.

Either way, it was a chance to see incumbent U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., in the same room with three of the men running against him in November's election. Democrat William Griffith, Libertarian John Cobin and Greenville Antiwar Society founder Ted Christian, who is running as a write-in candidate, participated. (Green Party candidate Faye Walters did not.)

Their job -- along with about 100 other people, most of whom were high school students or younger -- was simple: Balance the federal budget.

The Principles and Priorities workshop was sponsored by the Arlington, Va.-based Concord Coalition and held at the University Center in Greenville.

Workbooks were distributed containing 33 items that would either cost money or generate it. Many of the nine committees found themselves rushed through the process, forced to skip over certain issues in order to spend time on others.

The first item on the list was controversial among all the different groups. They had to decide whether to freeze all non-defense and non-homeland security discretionary spending. In other words, cutting dollars across the board.

"I could go for that. That's what I talked the group into," Inglis said. "The best argument for that is that it spreads the pain across all agencies that are getting money. There may be better or more surgical ways to do it ... but on the other hand, if you're trying to summon the political will to balance the budget, that's one of the best ways."

Voting for such a measure meant the mock committee had to skip several others, including increasing the maximum Pell Grant award to \$4,550; cutting agricultural subsidies; eliminating the one dollar bill; and eliminating the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program, which cleans up hazardous waste.

"We decided all the other things were just little, minor things," said 17-year-old Ashleigh Lancaster, one of about 50 students from Boiling Springs High School.

Lancaster was the chairwoman of her committee, and was a hit with Inglis' staffers, who would nod in her direction and half-whisper, "She's keeping up with Bob -- on the complex stuff."

Each chair was given a thick book with the leading argument for each case taken from the top advocacy groups backing each side of each issue.

"It's a lot like Congress, because you have some information but others have more information. Are you going to share it well, or not so well?" Inglis said.

In the exercise, Cobin, the Libertarian, was chairman of his committee, which he later emphasized was made up entirely of Republicans. His group finished the day with a budget that was \$806 billion in the red.

"We had a good group of students," Cobin said. "Most of them wanted to cut taxes and increase benefits. It's the typical, age-old problem. I wanted to cut taxes and cut benefits."

Another committee was headed by Bill Quinton, a veteran, which led to slightly heated discourse with fellow members Griffith and Christian. When deciding whether to cut the entire \$67 billion on this country's missile defense system, Griffith called the program "stupid" and Christian called it "hopeless." But that group ended the day with the largest budget surplus, about \$1.2 trillion.

When asked later, Inglis -- whose committee came up with a \$218 billion surplus -- said that, "North Korea just launched some test missiles, and the real threat is that Iran may develop that capacity. My argument is that we need to stay ahead of that threat."

The students learned a few lessons in politics, too.

When Inglis' committee was debating scaling back the home mortgage interest deduction, Inglis chimed in, "Believe me, the Realtors would absolutely bury you."

Inglis concluded the event by telling everyone that a stronger economy would lead to a balanced federal budget.

"I learned from Bob's budgetary message that it's our job to go out and work and make more money for Bob to spend," Christian said.

Afterward, Griffith pointed out that the day took for granted the "Enron-like accounting" that the government uses, and that dealing with an annual budget deficit isn't the same as working toward eliminating the total federal debt.

"This really amounts to child abuse ... in the sense that they're going to have deal with it, the children of today," Griffith said. "We're affecting future generations, making it more difficult for them to take care of their own problems. And I think it's wrong."

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