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DFL gubernatorial candidates address Native American issues

by [Tom Robertson](#), Minnesota Public Radio
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St. Paul, Minn. — Nine DFL candidates for Minnesota governor were in Bemidji Thursday night participating in a forum on Native American issues.

More than 100 people turned out for the event at Bemidji State University. The candidates rotated between nine discussion groups, fielding questions on tribal sovereignty, Indian gaming, education, health care and crime on the reservations.

Peggy Flanagan is director of Wellstone Action's Native American Leadership Program, one of the forum's sponsors. Flanagan said this is the first time a cross-tribal governor candidate forum has been held focusing on Native American issues.

"So often we have candidates who come to Indian Country a couple of weeks, a couple of days before the election. And it's January and we're having intense conversations with the candidates about Native American issues. And we're going to hold them accountable through the rest of the election cycle," Flanagan said.

Elizabeth Towle chairs the Native Vote Alliance of Minnesota, one of the forum organizers. Towle said over the past decade, Native Americans have become more engaged in the election process.

"Honestly, we were kind of scared about the turnout. We didn't think we would get as many people here. But it's great that we have the room overflowing, so it's really exciting. And I think it shows that Native Americans are going to be proactive rather than reactive to issues and to the candidates coming to the reservations," Towle said.

Organizers say Republican candidates were invited but declined to participate.