Governor watching debate on death penalty

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Gov. Brian Schweitzer said Monday he remains in favor of the death penalty, but is keeping an open mind as a proposed ban advances in the Legislature.

Schweitzer, in an interview, said he continues to gather more information and has met with both sides of the debate — potentially opening the door for him to sign the ban if it clears both chambers.

The proposed ban has already cleared a Senate controlled by Republicans. It awaits a committee hearing later this month in a House split 50-50 between the parties, although controlled for organizational purposes by the Democrats.

Proponents argue that executing a prisoner is more costly than a sentence of life in prison and that the risk of killing an innocent person is just too great.

The governor has publicly stated support for the death penalty going back to 2004, his first election, and again last fall in a debate with his Republican opponent for governor, state Sen. Roy Brown.

"By and large I haven't changed my overall position on the death penalty," Schweitzer said. "I'm trying to keep an open mind. ... "I'm still listening to both sides of the debate."

The Montana Abolition Coalition, serving as an umbrella group for those pushing the ban, said it was good news that Schweitzer is open to the idea.

Jennifer Kirby, group coordinator, said they are focused on a hearing later this month in a House committee after getting the bill out of the Senate, and are now hoping to push it through the House.

"We would hope the governor would take a serious look at that," she said.

Schweitzer said that his Catholic faith will weigh in his decision, but is not the final arbiter. The Catholic Church opposes the death penalty.

"I have 50-some year tradition of Catholicism that I have to square this with," Schweitzer said. "But I still represent the people of Montana, not Rome."

Schweitzer said where he grew up on a farm, people generally believe you should have to take responsibility for your actions.

Schweitzer said one argument that has caught his attention is the notion that the endless appeals in death penalty cases cost the state more than life in prison without the possibility of parole. But he's not entirely convinced.

"It could be, however, the process needs to be changed,"

would be dropping insurance for their children to go on the public insurance?" committee chairman Sen. Roy Brown, R-Billings, asked Hunter.

"That has been a concern and I think the fact that the initiative put in that three-month waiting period, that was designed to speak to that issue," Hunter said.

The Senate committee did not take immediate action on the bill.

Lawmakers in the House Appropriations Committee are expected to make a final decision on CHIP funding this week.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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Logical reaction

An observation that some have missed or never thought of concerning. We should never think of the death penalty as pay back or retribution, but rather as a consequence, a logical conclusion to an action one takes.

When you drive rampantly through a stop sign, you face a consequence for your action, and if done without regard for life or safety, then you must pay for your deeds with money, jail time or maybe both.

When you decide to not pay taxes or steal, or yes even kill someone, you must pay the consequences for your actions.

Should we take the gun away from the officer of the law? By taking away the penalty of death, you take away our protection of the evil around us. If you had your hand cut off for stealing would you even want to think about committing such a crime? Probably not!

But if the consequence is a nice warm jail with meals and a wonderful law library, what have I to lose?

So do not stand up for that evil person. Stand up for what is good, right and honest.

That person who wantonly kills, rapes or kidnaps needs the FULL penalty of the law, not a get-out-of-jail free card!

— F.L. Green, Black Eagle

GUEST OPINION

EXHIBIT 44
DATE 3/25/09
SB 236

our minds: Speak properly, speak freely, death penalty

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— *Ray Peck, Helena*

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jump to conclusions as to why I voted no. I am not a bigot, nor am I ignorant. I do feel it is a historical step for our country to elect a biracial person as president but I personally don't give a hoot what color he or she is as long as they do right by the people.

One of the problems we face in this country is people jumping to conclusions and the "I am better then you" attitudes. So as a southern white woman, don't be part of the problem, it makes you sound like white trash.

Just an opinion of a Yankee white boy.

— *Robbie Regennitter, Great Falls*

Because we can

In response to Barbara Mayne's inquiry about "Why bother," well the simple answer is: We have a right to free speech (still) in this country, and the people who answered the poll have the right to be heard just like she does.

I did not watch the inauguration and I also did not answer the poll question. Why? Because I did not want to. It is as simple as that.

As for those who did not watch being "bigots" and "ignorant," that is a stupid opinion, as far as I'm concerned.

The only people whom I have met who spew such bile and hate at others and "hate" those who disagree with them are liberals and socialist. I am suspicious, Barbara.

I do understand that we have been brow beaten for years to feel guilt and shame for what other people did 150 to 200 years ago.

I also can see that you and many other people feel this last election is your way of atoning for the evil deeds years ago. And because this is still America, you can feel that way if you want.

But since I believe that President Obama is a dishonest person and will do or say anything to get power and because I believe that he is a devoted Socialist, I could not bring myself to support him. I don't care what his ethnicity is.

We will not shut up and go away, like you want.

— *Richard M. Way, Great Falls*

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Not a good memorial

Recently I attended the hearing on SB236 (to ban the death penalty in Montana) in the Judiciary Committee of the Senate. There were passionate stories both for and against the bill from people who have had family members or friends murdered. Those favoring the bill told stories of working through sorrow and anger and eventually concluding that killing another person as revenge would not be a memorial they wanted to have on their consciences.

One man told his story of spending 10 years in prison, much of it on Death Row, for a murder he didn't commit. He was finally cleared by DNA evidence. Marietta Jaeger-Lane's story was reported in The Tribune earlier. Her daughter was kidnapped and murdered in Montana in 1972. A former prison warden changed his mind on capital punishment after watching executions. A Roman Catholic bishop testified his church supports a total Pro-Life stance that covers conception to death of a person and the same message was heard from people of Protestant faiths. Disputing the argument that the death penalty is a deterrent, one speaker asked why North Dakota, which does not have the death penalty, has less crime than Montana. Most murders are not premeditated but committed when a person is under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

While realizing that the death penalty, like abortion and gun control, is a very emotional issue, I was still saddened by the results of the Tribune poll where 81 percent of the votes cast were for keeping the death penalty in Montana.

— *Lillian Mathsen, Great Falls*