

Augusta forum on guns, safety and rights draws 50

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By Jessica Lowell

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AUGUSTA — A forum on gun safety and gun rights drew about 50 people Sunday to the University of Maine at Augusta and prompted a wide range of questions on a topic that's hotly debated nationally and locally.

Moderator Grace Leonard noted that when she was growing up in Massachusetts, the high school she attended had a rifle club, which both boys and girls joined.

"We thought nothing about it. It was just one of the sports. Think about that today. Would we have rifle clubs in high schools today?"

The program featured speakers David Cheever, the Maine state archivist; David Trahan, executive director of the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine; and Geoff Bickford, executive director of the Maine Gun Safety Coalition.

The program was presented by the University of Maine at Augusta College of Arts and the UMA Senior College, which puts on four programs a year.

When Maine established its independence from Massachusetts, Cheever said, it incorporated the right to bear arms in Article 1, Section 16 in its own constitution: "Every citizen has a right to keep and bear arms and this right shall never be questioned."

He recounted what happened when that right was abridged in the wake of the contentious 1879 three-way governor's election, which resulted in an armed insurrection in Augusta. In trying to control the mobs in Augusta in the weeks after the election, Civil War hero and former Gov. Joshua Chamberlain was pressed into service, and he declared that anyone carrying a rifle would be subject to confiscation of the weapon and perhaps arrest. That resulted in people leaving their rifles at home and instead bringing handguns, which Cheever said was the first instance of concealed carry.



People listen on Sunday to a discussion about the Second Amendment during a forum at the University of Maine at Augusta. *Kennebec Journal* photo by Andy Molloy

"It was the only time in Maine when martial law was declared, and a respected citizen was placed in charge of the entire military of the state," he said. "It's the only time that the right to bear arms in Maine was challenged, and nobody challenged when (Gov. Alonzo)

Garcelon demanded it and Chamberlain backed it.”

The forum was intended to present ideas and not to debate the issues. Even so, Trahan and Bickford traded perspectives on how and when background checks ought to be required, whether and under what circumstances guns may be taken away from someone, how the courts have interpreted the Second Amendment and balancing the different rights offered by the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

On this issue of firearms registration, Trahan said it was probably the most fearful of all the laws that could be passed.

“Gun safety is being a responsible citizen with your rights, whether it’s the First Amendment, the Second Amendment or any other amendment,” Trahan said. “We have rights in this country. But when I bring a gun into any environment, I have the responsibility to make sure that firearm never hurts another individual or myself.”

In Maine, he said, hunters are required to take hunter safety classes; but because of how those classes are funded — by a tax on long guns — handgun safety is not taught at that time, because handguns are not generally used in hunting.

Trahan said he thinks a bill is being developed that would require handgun safety to be taught as a component of hunter safety classes. Most gun accidents are caused by handguns, and handguns are used in the majority of crimes.

“It’s something we should have been doing years ago,” he said.



Bickford said he agreed, but he would like to see Maine follow the path that several other states do in requiring handgun safety classes when handguns are bought.

“They would get the same training whether they want to use them for hunting or not, and it would create a funding stream for that as well, Bickford said.

“Let me explain to you why that’s a problem,” Trahan said. “No other constitutional protection you have requires you to take a course before you exercise it. That’s really what happens when you have to take a handgun safety course before you can buy a firearm. That’s a de facto ban on your firearm rights.”

“I’ll just say that many other states require this and very few people in those states complain about it. There’s a wide range of organizations that offer it. It’s true, there isn’t any other constitutional right that requires you to engage in a form of training beforehand. But there’s no other constitutional right that confers upon you the ability to so immediately kill yourself or your family members or others. So that should require a little training.”

The forum drew about 50 people from across the area.

“This is a discussion that always brings people out, isn’t it?” said one man who declined to give his name. “I come to quite of few of these. It keeps the synapses working.”

Elizabeth Reinsborough and her husband, John, who are active with the Senior College and attend the forums to get different views.

“Today, these were all pretty new views. We don’t follow the Second Amendment,” said Reinsborough, of Readfield.

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