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Election over, so let the governor's race begin

Key economic issues should be at the center of the most wide-open race in 16 years.

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The cardboard signs should already be down and the political TV ads, which had drowned out the ones for soft drinks and Viagra, have vanished from the airwaves. But the political season is just beginning.

Next Nov. 2, Mainers will elect a new governor. He or she will be selected from a wide-open field of candidates in the

established parties and a deep field of independents.

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So far 21 people have expressed their intentions to run, and others are rumored to be thinking of entering the race. With no clear front-runner, the primary races next June promise to be a political traffic jam the likes of which we haven't seen since the 1994 race that produced Maine's second independent governor, Angus King.

Whoever takes over from Gov. John Baldacci in 2011 will inherit an economy that will be just emerging from the worst downturn in a generation. Voters will have seen the unemployment rate climb to nearly 9 percent and personal income decline faster than at any time since the Great Depression.

Baldacci and the Legislature will spend the next six months reacting to the harsh economic reality and patching up the two-year budget passed this spring that is already hopelessly out of balance. Brave rhetoric aside, visionary programs will have to wait for the next group of leaders.

In the months ahead, we will listen to the gubernatorial candidates and focus on their plans to move Maine forward in several key economic areas.

Even before the recession, Maine steadily ranked 35th in the nation in per capita income. Growing new businesses that create better-paying jobs and persuading companies to move here has to be a top priority for the next governor. We will be looking for clearly stated strategies to work with business interests needed to achieve those goals.

Paying for multi-layer state and local government will be an ongoing struggle for the next administration. In his second term, Baldacci attempted to lower costs by consolidating services in school administration, corrections and natural resource agencies with varying degrees of success. The next governor should have a clear vision for how this work can continue.

Maine's energy future remains an open question. We are now among the most dependent states on imported oil for home heating, but we could become an exporter of green electricity. That change would require billions in investment in transmission systems as well as environmental trade-offs that are just beginning to be discussed. Energy issues should be at the heart of this campaign.

Education remains the biggest ticket item in state and local budgets, even while school enrollments decline. K-12 and higher education are the keys to producing the educated work force that would attract higher-paying jobs. How to best pay for and improve education in Maine will be a major challenge for the next governor.

So the signs may be coming down, but the politics are just beginning. If they want to have a chance to be heard, Mainers should tune in early to this important race.

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