COAKLEY PEPPERED WITH QUESTIONS AS SHE BIDS FOR CORNER OFFICE

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, FEB. 11, 2014…. It's not the appropriate time to consider firing the embattled commissioner of the Department of Children and Families, Democratic candidate for governor Martha Coakley said Tuesday, supporting Gov. Deval Patrick's decision to stick with Olga Roche in the face of calls for her removal.

Patrick has hired an independent consultant to review the department following the disappearance late last year of a 5-year-old Fitchburg boy and has said that Roche has his support and the support of Health and Human Services Secretary John Polanowicz.

"My feeling is, and I've said this, is we need to get that audit. We need to look at the scope of what they find and then that decision is going to be up to the governor based on those findings," Coakley, the state's attorney general, said on Tuesday, responding to a call from a Republican gubernatorial rival Charlie Baker for Roche's resignation.

Asked why Patrick should wait, Coakley said it was not clear to her that removing Roche now would be best for an agency trying to rebound from a string of crises involving the oversight of children under its watch.

"Partly because you need someone at the helm and she has experience and unless you have someone who's ready to come in and turn this agency around I'm not sure that's the immediate solution," Coakley said.

Coakley appeared on Tuesday for a 90-minute roundtable and Q&A at Suffolk University sponsored by the Rappaport Center for Law and Public Service as part of an ongoing series with gubernatorial candidates.

Coakley could not name a Republican she admires, and said the difference between her and the other four Democrats in the race is her public sector experience. "I'm the one who's dedicated a good part of my life to public service and to making it work and making it work well, keeping kids safe," said Coakley, the former Middlesex County DA who is finishing her eighth and final year as attorney general.

On the issue of homelessness, Coakley said, "We need housing. I don't know how we do it exactly, but I know we need to do it." She said she would engage advocacy groups to find the right solutions.
Coakley also acknowledged as a "economic time bomb" the state and municipal unfunded pension liabilities and retiree health care liabilities. "It's a huge problem. I know it's there," she said, before adding, "If you have answers, I'll listen."

During the roundtable, Coakley highlighted her top three priorities, including a populist refrain that has been adopted by candidates around the country that economic recovery must touch every family.

"I believe that the next governor of Massachusetts has to lead a Massachusetts that is both prosperous and fair," Coakley said. As the economy rebounds, she said, "It has to turn around for everybody, not just the people at the top. Not just Wall Street. But for everybody."

Coakley also said she would work to "transform" the school system into one where every child is safe and taught the skills they will need to compete in the global economy, and to continue fighting to reduce health care costs and eliminate the stigma around accessing mental and behavioral health services.

After the event, Coakley said she did not believe her defense of the Department of Children and Families against a lawsuit brought by Children's Rights, which alleges that thousands in the Massachusetts foster care system were being abused and neglected, contradicted her public campaign statements.

Coakley has argued on the campaign trail that DCF's dueling mission of protecting children and keeping families in tact sometimes sets the agency up for failure, and has called for a separate division within DCF to focus on child protection. Baker has said Coakley should stop fighting the lawsuit and settle.

A federal judge ruled last fall in favor of the state, but Children's Rights is appealing.

"That lawsuit was specifically about foster homes. That lawsuit has been dismissed on the merits by the judge and I believe we going forward are always going to try to make our agencies better, but those are the relevant facts," Coakley said. She added that she represented the agency as part of her duties as attorney general based on facts that were "a fair representation."

"That in no way contradicts what I've said about needing a better agency moving forward," Coakley said. She also said she supported further review of DCF's policies around granting waivers to foster parents with previous criminal convictions.

Over the course of the conversation at Suffolk, Coakley fielded questions on everything from decreasing the state's reliance on fossil fuels to addressing homelessness and incorporating civics and financial literacy into public school curricula.

Though did not offer specific plans to address these issues, she largely agreed with those posing the questions that Massachusetts must continue to grow its clean energy
sector to create jobs and improve the environment, take people - especially veteran - off the streets and find them shelter, and equip students with critical skills to succeed.

Coakley spoke about the need to decrease state spending on state and county prisons and jails, and instead focus on education, substance abuse and diversion programs that could keep young people out of the criminal justice system.

"There's too many people for who we did not intervene earlier," Coakley said.

One student asked the attorney general why she felt the need to identify herself as a Democrat, and Coakley responded with a defense of the party system in Massachusetts. Two independents - Jeffrey McCormick and Evan Falchuk - are also running for governor.

"I do believe parties matter," Coakley said, arguing that they allow candidates to identify with an agenda and set of values and be clear with the public about "what missions you have and what drives you." She also said political party affiliations make it easier to work with Legislature's branches around common goals, which include promoting the success of businesses, but making sure they succeed "fairly."

"If you are always running alone and it's about the cult of personality you're going to be much less effective," Coakley said.

Coakley said she was aware of the issue of underfunding for tobacco control programs as well as the low salaries paid to public prosecutors. As a former assistant district attorney, Coakley said she understands the call for raises for public prosecutors and defenders, but said she might also look at helping to forgive some student loans as a way to incentivize law school graduates taking jobs in the public sector.

Asked how she might pay for some of her proposals, including a longer school day, Coakley said she would look first to economic growth, efficiencies and fraud and waste. Though she would not take new taxes off the table, she said, "It's not certainly the first place I would go and I hope we do not need to go there, but the market is changing."

If she did propose new taxes, Coakley said she wouldn't ask the poorest or the middle class to bear that burden.

Baker on Tuesday pledged to never cut local aid for cities and towns, and to increase local aid at rates commensurate with revenue growth from tax collections. Coakley would not make a similar promise, but said she's committed to listening to cities and towns and providing regional equity for communities outside Greater Boston.

"We are nothing, in some ways, but the 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts and I appreciate the need for the state to be a full and fair partner in funding for the things we want our cities and towns to do," Coakley said, singling out funding for education.