
Posted on Fri, Sep. 22, 2006

6th District candidates face off over three T's

Trio debates taxes, terrorism, transit

BY PATRICK SWEENEY
Pioneer Press

Congressional candidates Michele Bachmann, Patty Wetterling and John Binkowski dueled over taxes, transit and terrorism on Thursday night in a Woodbury debate.

Binkowski, the Independence Party candidate, repeatedly offered the most direct responses to questions posed by the debate moderators.

Bachmann, a Republican, and Wetterling, a Democrat, have far more name recognition and a far better chance than Binkowski of winning the election.

But both Wetterling and Bachmann sometimes fell back on preplanned talking points.

The three are seeking to represent the 6th District — which runs through the eastern and northern Twin Cities suburbs, from Afton through Stillwater and Anoka to past St. Cloud.

It's a Republican-leaning district, where Wetterling lost to incumbent U.S. Rep. Mark Kennedy by 8 percentage points two years ago. But Kennedy's decision to run for the Senate leaves an open seat, making it one of only about 50 districts in the country that political experts say realistically could be won by either a Democrat or a Republican this year.

About 300 people, most of whom seemed already to be backing Wetterling or Bachmann, crowded into the Woodbury Amphitheater for the debate.

On the war in Iraq, debate moderators tried to force the candidates to choose one of three options: Immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops, gradual withdrawal or "staying the course."

Bachmann said Americans must demonstrate the will to defeat the country's enemies and "part of that will be to stay the course."

Wetterling said the war in Iraq has been a distraction from America's real fight against global terrorists. "It's not going to be won in Iraq, it's a bigger fight," she said.

She said the U.S. needs a plan to end the war in Iraq, but she did not spell out a plan.

Binkowski said the U.S. should make the case that it does not want Iraq's oil, seek a United Nations force to protect Iraq's borders and then leave security within Iraq to Iraqis.

"I'd be first on the list to give our president a swift kick in the butt for getting us into this situation in the first place," Binkowski said.

On transportation, Bachmann and Wetterling called for significantly more funding to build roads and bridges. Wetterling also called for extending the planned Minneapolis-to-Big Lake commuter rail line to St. Cloud.

Bachmann said she would take money out of transit programs, if necessary, to pay for roads. "We need to lay more asphalt all across the 6th District," she said.

Binkowski said he would support increasing the 18.4-cents-a-gallon federal gasoline tax, probably by about 25 cents, to pay for roads and transit. Wetterling and Bachmann rejected a gas tax increase.

When asked how Congress should help financially stressed Americans, Binkowski suggested repealing the federal income and payroll taxes and replacing them with a national sales tax.

Bachmann said making permanent President Bush's temporary income tax cuts would spur an economic boom that would benefit ordinary people.

Wetterling said those Bush income tax cuts mostly benefit very wealthy people, but she did not say which of the cuts she would keep and which she would let expire. She called for extending home mortgage deductions to people who do not itemize their income taxes, increasing aid for college students and encouraging portable pension plans that would move with workers as they change jobs.

In response to an audience question about stem-cell research, Bachmann said she supported the less-controversial adult stem cell research. Wetterling and Binkowski said they supported all stem cell research, including research on cells derived from embryos.

Patrick Sweeney can be reached at psweeney@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5253.

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