

# Oberstar, Grams debate the issues of the 8th District

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Congressman Jim Oberstar (DFL) and Rod Grams (R) squared off in a United States House 8th District debate, sponsored by the nonprofit organization Debate Minnesota, at the Reif Center in Grand Rapids on Tuesday. The debate was one of 15 that Debate Minnesota has scheduled for this election year. Moderated by Patrick Marx of the Blandin Foundation and Larry Oakes of the Star Tribune-Duluth news bureau, the debate addressed several issues.

“In my 32 years in the legislature, you’ve given me your trust and I think I’ve exercised that trust in the best possible interest,” began Oberstar. “It’s been a great privilege to serve you.”

“When we’re talking about the 8th district there are a couple of things missing, Jobs and Jim,” began Grams. “There is a decline in the economy and we have to take action to help the logging community, the mining community, farmers, and small businesses.”

When asked about ending the winter shut down on the Lake Superior locks and channel system, Oberstar explained that he initiated a 10 year study in 1969 to explore a way to keep the seaway system open. He said it is not physically possible because of Mother Nature’s ice build-up in the locks, although he said he is interested in exploring an expansion of capacity in the locks and has authored legislation for ice breakers.

Grams said he feels there is no reason why the Lake Superior system can not stay open 12 months a year. He said he would talk with Canadian counter-parts to develop a way to keep it open. He also said he would put together a Congressional panel to discuss ways the seaway could stay open.

Closer to home, the candidates were asked whether they support the proposed Mesaba Energy project and its coal gasification technology. Oberstar said he believed it is a very innovative idea, bipartisan initiative and has the “distinct” opportunity to produce added electricity. He explained that he supported federal funding in the form of a grant and loan for the project.

Grams said he also is not opposed to the project and he thinks the new coal gasification technology is something that should be explored and encouraged. He continued by addressing the fact that many people have questions and those questions need to be answered. Oberstar agreed that the concerns are very genuine and must be addressed through research and in the state public utilities commission hearing process.

When asked about the war in Iraq and whether they believe the troops should be withdrawn or gradually pulled out, Oberstar explained that he voted against the resolution to give President Bush the authority to wage war. He said he found no credible evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, “yet we entered Iraq, toppled Saddam, helped establish a government and now the troops are caught in a cross-fire.”

“It is time for America to move out; we’ve trained an army, we’ve trained police,” said Oberstar. “We are seen as an occupying force; our presence is like a cancer spreading throughout the country. We need to draw our troops home and bring them home with honor.”

“First we have to remember why we are there,” responded Grams. “We can not cut and run; if we pull out now we would dishonor those who have given their lives and we would break our promises to the Iraqi people because there would be massive bloodshed if we were to leave.

“If we do not defeat them now it will only put off a bigger war or more attacks in the future,” continued Grams, referring to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

“Remember the attack did not come from Iraq,” added Oberstar. “It would have been the right thing to stay in Afghanistan and find Osama Bin Laden.”

When questions were opened to those in attendance, the candidates were asked how they stand on a number of issues. On health care, Oberstar said he supports equitable care for all and a single provider system. Grams said he believes the single provider system does not work, rather we need to explore other ideas such as insurance provider reforms, full deductibility and vouchers.

On the issue of marriage, Grams said he strongly supports marriage as defined between a man and a woman. Oberstar said he has voted in support of the act that has left the definition to the states to decide, allowing for room to provide for a partners act.

Several questions addressed jobs and the economy of the 8th District. Grams said he believes the district is blessed with resources which are being restricted by the federal government such as wetland mitigation and closed ports. Oberstar rebutted, saying he has been a job creator for northern Minnesota, citing the increase in steal mining jobs that were going overseas.

When asked what they like about their opponent, both candidates were polite and spoke highly of each other.