

October 20, 2006

Tight race, intense debate

By Mark Fischenich

The Free Press

MANKATO— A 90-minute battle of words, ideas and accusations revealed distinct differences between Congressman Gil Gutknecht and challenger Tim Walz Thursday night in Mankato.

And the intensity of the debate before an overflow crowd at Bethany Lutheran College provided further evidence of the growing consensus among political experts that the 1st District race is a tight one.

The two repeatedly sparred over the accuracy of a growing number of television attack ads launched by each campaign. But mostly, they gave the approximately 400 people in attendance a clear choice for Nov. 7.

Gutknecht, a six-term Republican who had cruised to victory in his previous three re-election campaigns, offered optimistic words about America's direction and the GOP-led federal government's ability to solve problems such as the Iraq war, terrorist threats, dependence on foreign oil and economic challenges.

If elected to another term, Gutknecht promised to concentrate on promoting economic prosperity through reduced taxes, work to implement his prescription drug reimportation plan and promote renewable energy. But foremost, he said, would be a focus on protecting Americans from foreign threats.

"We need to keep America safe," Gutknecht said. "That's one of the most important things we do in Washington."

Walz, a Mankato Democrat making his first run for public office, talked of an America that's desperate for change after being poorly led by Washington Republicans who have taken the country into a military quagmire, driven up the national debt and left average workers worse off while pandering to wealthy special interests.

A geography teacher at Mankato West High School and a retired 24-year-veteran of the Army National Guard, Walz said he would bring accountability to a Congress that blindly followed the Bush administration into a war that had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks. He promised to invest in education and transportation, work to bring health care to the uninsured and strive to bring the federal budget into balance.

"This country needs to move back to the common good," Walz said. "... The American public is ready for change like they've never been ready for change. We in the 1st District can be a part of that."

American policy in Iraq needs to move away from the failed attempt to solve the problem militarily and start focusing on a diplomatic solution, according to Walz, who called for a multinational force and a focus on improving Iraqi infrastructure. He pointed to the 70 recent American casualties and said the world's finest military has suffered terribly from the failed leadership in Washington.

"Donald Rumsfeld has been wrong every step of the way with this war," Walz said.

Gutknecht, a strong supporter of the administration's war policy until making a trip to Iraq in July, admitted mistakes have been made. But he said the war was justified because it ridded the world of Saddam Hussein, who would have been a threat to America if left in place.

"We were a lot more optimistic than we deserved to be," he said. "... That doesn't mean what we did was the wrong thing."

When the debate turned to domestic issues, Walz and Gutknecht continued to disagree.

Gutknecht rejected suggestions that more money is the solution for better educating students.

"We have not shortchanged students," according to Gutknecht, who also said that college tuition is rising at unreasonable rates. "At some point we have to start putting pressure on our universities. ... We have allowed the educational establishment to basically charge what they want."

Walz said education spending is a crucial investment that pays dramatic dividends whether it's pre-school programs or higher education.

"We're making it harder for our children to get an education in a world where they need it more than ever," he said.

Discussions about illegal immigration and taxes quickly transformed into an argument about campaign ads that have focused on those issues. Walz complained in particular about a Gutknecht ad that accuses him of supporting amnesty for illegal aliens.

He said he has clearly stated that he opposes amnesty and guaranteed that Gutknecht could not provide any evidence that he supports it.

Walz' support for repealing tax cuts for wealthier Americans is on record on a questionnaire he answered for Project VoteSmart, a bipartisan group that attempts to get candidates to answer tough questions about federal policy. Gutknecht refused to answer the questionnaire and then used Walz' answers in attack ads.

Walz read a strong condemnation of the ad by Project VoteSmart, which includes top Republicans such as Newt Gingrich and John McCain. Gutknecht said he's at a disadvantage because he has a voting record for Walz to attack, and he reminded the audience that the basic fact is true.

"You said you'd repeal the tax cuts," he said. The pair didn't offer any solutions for southern Minnesotans concerned about the proposed Dakota, Minnesota and Eastern Railroad expansion. Gutknecht said he knew it would be controversial as soon as the DM&E announced it wanted to bring dozens of high-speed coal trains through Mankato, Rochester and other parts of the district. But he said worse than the coal train project would be the DM&E failing to survive.

"In the end, we need good transportation and we need good railroads," he said.

Walz said Gutknecht and others in Congress failed the district by allowing a former DM&E lobbyist to insert a \$2.5 billion federal loan provision for the project into a transportation bill last year.

"My opponent, by his own admission, did not even read what was coming through here," Walz said.



Incumbent Rep. Gil Gutknecht (left) and challenger Tim Walz debated in Mankato Thursday night in their tightly contested battle for the 1st District seat in the U.S. House. *The Free Press*

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