

GOP Reps. Schwarz, Rogers face tough races

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Challenges ahead in both primary and general elections

News Staff Reporter

State and federal Democratic Party officials are predicting a party takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives in November, and they are hoping voters in Washtenaw and Livingston counties do their part.

In eastern Washtenaw, party icon U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-Dearborn, is poised to claim a 27th term over Republican write-in candidate Vinny Vernuccio from Ann Arbor. The focus is on western Washtenaw and Livingston counties, where incumbent Reps. Joe Schwarz, R-Battle Creek, and Mike Rogers, R-Brighton, appear headed for strong Democratic opposition in November. That is, assuming they survive their own party primaries. Rogers must beat Patrick Flynn on Aug. 8. Schwarz must successfully navigate the verbal minefield that has become the GOP primary against Tim Walberg in the 7th District.

Democrats are slowly rallying behind Royal Oak Deputy City Attorney Jim Marcinkowski, a former CIA agent whose Oakland-county roots pose a unique problem for Rogers. Marcinkowski has credibility on national security and is from a part of the district that Rogers, a former FBI agent and party rising star, dominated in the previous election.

Recent demographic shifts also make it possible for Democrats to trouble Schwarz in a district covering 14 townships in northern and western Washtenaw County, particularly because three of the four Democratic candidates in the race are county residents. Washtenaw County Sheriff's Deputy Daryl Campbell, an Ann Arbor native, Scio Township Trustee Chuck Ream, and Dexter auto executive Fred Strack will compete against Sharon Renier, of Munith, who beat two men in the 2004 primary and garnered 39 percent of the county vote against Schwarz that November.

What truly has Democrats hopeful about a hostile House takeover is the recent special election to replace prison-bound Randy "Duke" Cunningham, a former California congressman convicted of bribery. Republican Brian Bilbray won by 5 percentage points, but Democrats claimed a victory because the GOP reportedly spent more than \$5 million in the race, defending a district where it had a 14 percentage-point edge in registered voters.

"If the other party has to spend \$5 million to defend every strong Republican seat around the country, there's no way they can keep them all," Michigan Democratic Party Chairman Mark Brewer said.

Marcinkowski seems to be taking notice. During a brief meeting with The News this week, Marcinkowski was accompanied by former U.S. Ambassador Joe Wilson, whose wife Valerie Plame is at the center of the White House leak investigation. During the meeting, Marcinkowski acknowledged that the repeated visits with Wilson are, in part, intended to attract Democrats from outside of Michigan to get involved in the race.

In addition to a private fundraiser in Ann Arbor, Wilson and Marcinkowski appeared at \$100-a-person and \$500-a-person events in Brighton and Lansing last week.

Republicans were quick to respond that if the Bilbray race is a bellwether of anything, it's of more domination by GOP candidates.

"Scoreboard!" said Peter Simmons, a county Republican activist and event organizer who raises money for party initiatives nationally. "The Democratic Party in Michigan and nationally has no message, solutions or answers and has not created jobs in this state. When they do, I'm happy to discuss congressional races in California that Republicans won."

Spending might not be the issue for Republicans that Brewer and others suggest. The party raised \$27 million (\$15 million for House candidates) in just one fundraiser last week that featured President Bush in Washington, D.C. Bush, first lady Laura Bush, and Vice President Dick Cheney have raised a total of \$173.7 million this year, on track to smash the \$242.7 million raked in during the 2001-02 cycle.

Notables

* Clean Water Action, a national grass-roots environmental watchdog, formally endorsed Rebekah Warren to replace term-limited state Rep. Chris Kolb, D-Ann Arbor. The organization cited Warren's outspoken advocacy for environmental issues.

She also received a nod from Triangle Pride PAC, a statewide civil rights organization concentrating on issues important to the

homosexual, bisexual and transgender community.

Warren faces Ann Arbor City Council Member Leigh Greden, D-Third Ward, in the Aug. 8 primary.

* Several police organizations have endorsed Saline Republican Mike Radzik, a former lieutenant with the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department, in his effort to unseat county Commissioner Stephen Solowczuk, R-Saline, in the Aug. 8 primary. Both the Washtenaw County Deputy Sheriff's and Command Officer's associations, and the Police Officer's Association of Michigan recently endorsed Radzik, who also has support from Lodi Township Supervisor Jan Godek and York Township Supervisor Joe Zurawski.

* The Ypsilanti Police Officers Association has stepped into the political arena by endorsing a candidate for mayor for the first time. Local business owner Steve Pierce received the endorsement on a unanimous vote among the union's executive board, said union president Joseph Braunschneider.

Upcoming Events

* Supporters of 15th Congressional District Republican candidate Vince Vernuccio are hosting a barbecue fundraiser at 1 p.m. Saturday at Island Park in Ann Arbor. Suggested donation is \$40, or \$20 for students. Vernuccio and other candidates will address the crowd.

Vernuccio is running as a write-in candidate to unseat long-time incumbent U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-Dearborn. Call 734-213-2923 for more information.

* Democratic candidate Sharon Renier will be competing in eight events at the Michigan Senior Olympics, starting Saturday at the Western Michigan University and Kalamazoo College campuses. Renier, 50, will compete in six swimming events as well as the 100-meter and 200-meter dashes. Renier won the Democratic Party primary for the 7th Congressional District in 2004, and this year is one of four candidates seeking the nomination for the seat in the Aug. 8 primary.

Susan Oppat contributed to this report.

This is an occasional feature focusing on local and state politics through the November election. Have information on or a suggestion for a topic? Art Aisner can be reached at aaisner@annarbornews.com or 734-994-6823.

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