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Zimmer vows fiscal conservatism if elected to Senate

By RAJU CHEBIUM
GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — A former New Jersey congressman who seeks the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate is running on a platform of cutting taxes, strengthening homeland security and withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq as soon as practical without resorting to the "strict, mindless" timetable most Democrats seek.

Richard A. Zimmer served three terms in the House before losing a 1996 bid for the U.S. Senate to former Sen. Robert Torricelli after what's considered one of the nastiest statewide campaigns ever. His 2000 attempt to reclaim his House seat now occupied by Rep. Rush D. Holt, D-N.J., failed. Since leaving Congress, he's been a

lobbyist in Washington who commutes from his home in Hunterdon County.

"When this opportunity came up, I realized that I could provide a stark choice to the incumbent senator," said Zimmer, a 63-year-old Delaware Township resident who has vowed to run on the issues and not engage in excessive negativity. "I am running because this is an enormous opportunity to help New Jersey get past some difficult times and to achieve a very bright future."

Zimmer, who's favored by the New Jersey Republican Party in a primary, told Gannett News Service he decided to take a leave of absence from his practice and run for Senate because Democratic incumbent Frank R. Lautenberg hasn't been effec-

tive for New Jersey.

Two other Republicans also seek the GOP nod in the June 3 primary: state Sen. Joe Pennacchio and Murray Sabrin, an economics professor at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

A recent Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey Poll showed Zimmer has a lead over his GOP rivals. Zimmer was approached after the previous GOP favorite, former Goya Foods executive Andy Unanue, dropped out. That poll also showed Lautenberg leading his Democratic primary opponent, Rep. Robert E. Andrews, D-N.J., by a wide margin but said a majority of New Jersey Democrats want change — a potential boost for Andrews and Zimmer.

Lautenberg's spokeswoman, Julie Roginsky, rebutted Zim-

mer's charge that the incumbent has been ineffective.

"While Dick Zimmer has been a Washington lobbyist, he failed to notice that Senator Lautenberg sponsored the bill to get military families reimbursed for body armor they bought for loved ones in Iraq; that he helped protect New Jersey's ports by fighting and winning the battle to have homeland security funds allotted based on risk; and that he defeated attempts by the Bush administration to eliminate health care coverage for tens of thousands of children in New Jersey," she said in a statement Thursday.

Zimmer's biggest criticism of the 84-year-old incumbent is on fiscal issues.

Specifically, he said, Lautenberg hasn't delivered on a

promise he made during his first Senate campaign in 1982 to improve New Jersey's rate of return on tax dollars it sends to Washington compared with what it gets back in federal programs.

According to the Tax Foundation, a Washington group, New Jersey has been at or close to the bottom in federal receipts since at least 1981 compared with every other state.

Dan Benson, a consultant for the William J. Hughes Public Policy Center at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, estimated the state received about 60 cents back for every dollar it sent to Washington in the 2006 fiscal year, the latest year for which such a calculation could be made.



Richard A. Zimmer

See Zimmer, Page A18

Zimmer

FROM PAGE A17

Zimmer touted his congressional record as a staunch fiscal conservative and criticized Lautenberg for repeatedly voting for tax increases over his career — thus increasing the tax burden on New Jerseyans. That compounds the financial burden on residents, who already pay more in property taxes than people elsewhere, Zimmer said.

He added that Lautenberg isn't steered enough money to the state in earmarks, which critics deride as pork-barrel projects.

Taxpayers for Common Sense, an anti-pork group in Washington, ranked Lautenberg 19th among senators in receiving earmarks. He and Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., ranked 20th, teamed up on almost all earmarks, steering nearly \$289 million to New Jersey by coordinating their requests with other lawmakers, the group's analysis shows.

That was well below what the Senate's earmark king, Sen. Thad Cochran, R-Miss., who got nearly \$836 million for his projects, according to the analysis.

But Lautenberg's aides said New Jersey received a lot more earmarked dollars on a per person basis — \$32.79 — compared

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with bigger states like New York (\$23.52 per head), Florida (\$17.97) and Michigan (\$9.60).

Meanwhile, Zimmer's Republican rivals have hammered him for working as a lobbyist. Early indications are that the winner among the Democratic candidates, who are keenly focused on battling each other for

now, would also make Zimmer's lobbying an issue during the general election campaign.

Mike Murphy, who chairs Andrews' campaign, said Zimmer would be a formidable candidate who has name recognition and knows how Washington works. But he expects the eventual Democratic winner to criticize Zimmer on his lobbying, although Zimmer has said he's proud of his lobbying work.

During the 1980s and into the 1990s, the GOP gained political mileage by labeling Democrats liberals, making it a dreaded "L-word," Murphy said.

"In the eyes of the public (today) the L-word would be lobbyist," he said.

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