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Zimmer: I'd look to cut taxes, U.S. troops in Iraq

Former GOP congressman wants to provide 'a stark choice' against Lautenberg

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 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 Holt, D-Hopewell Township, failed. Since leaving Congress, he's been a lobbyist in Washington who commutes to 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.



MEL EVANS / ASSOCIATED PRESS

GOP Senate hopeful Richard Zimmer answers questions in Trenton in April as he announced his effort to unseat Democratic Sen. Frank Lautenberg.

"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 that he decided to take a leave of absence from his practice and run for Senate because Democratic incumbent Frank Lautenberg hasn't been effective for New Jersey.

Two other Republicans also seek the GOP nod in the June 3

primary — state Sen. Joseph Pennacchio and Murray Sabrin, an economics professor at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

A recent Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey Poll showed that Zimmer has a lead over his GOP rivals. Zimmer was approached after the previous GOP favorite, former Goya Foods executive Andrew Unanue, dropped out.

That poll also showed Lautenberg leading his Democratic primary opponent, Rep. Rob Andrews, D-Haddon Heights, 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 Zimmer's charge that the incumbent has been ineffective.

Failed to notice

"While Dick Zimmer has been a Washington lobbyist, he failed to notice that Sen. 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 on 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 that 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.

Touted record

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 hasn'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 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 with bigger states such as New

Zimmer's congressional and lobbying record

Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — Former Rep. Richard Zimmer, who seeks the GOP nomination for U.S. Senate, has been with the Washington office of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher since 2001. That was one year after he lost his bid to reclaim his congressional seat and five years after he lost his attempt to win the U.S. Senate seat.

Zimmer, who's on unpaid leave from the lobbying and law firm while he campaigns for the Senate this year, served in Congress from 1991 to 1996 and was a member of the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee. He was known as a fiscal conservative and was praised for his environmental record.

Before coming to Congress, the Yale Law School graduate served in the state Senate from 1987 to 1991.

According to Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher Web site, the firm employs 950 lawyers in 14 cities in the United States, Europe and the Middle East.

The U.S. Senate's lobbyist database shows that Zimmer represented business clients such as cell phone provider T-Mobile USA and the Business Roundtable, a group of chief executive officers from leading U.S.-based companies.

Among his other clients listed in the database:

- Samueli Institute, a nonprofit group in Virginia that focuses on the body's healing process and does research for the military.

- VisionQuest, which works with troubled youngsters and has operated in New Jersey for more than 20 years, and runs residential and nonresidential programs for at-risk boys and girls in New Lisbon.

- Schlumberger, a firm that makes various products, software and provides information technology to oil companies.

- Pacific Maritime Association, a group of marine cargo companies, port terminal operators and stevedoring operations along the West Coast. According to its Web site, the group's primary purpose is to negotiate contracts with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

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, also would 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.

Byrne on Byrne

An event at the Carnegie Library in Atlantic City on Thursday night reminded folks there was a time when humor and humanity played a role in politics.

Former Gov. Brendan Byrne regaled nearly four dozen invited guests in a lecture sponsored by the Hughes Center for Public Policy of Richard Stockton College. Byrne, a well-known wit, recalled the ups and downs of his 1973-81 term as governor while being interviewed — or egged on — by author Nick Acocella, publisher of the Politifax newsletter.

Byrne, 84, once angered the owners of McDonald's with a proclamation honoring the restaurant chain's success.

"I made note they had sold their one-billionth hamburger and were already on their second cow," he said.

He tweaked an audience in

Philadelphia by thanking Pennsylvania for "doing all the paperwork of the Revolution while we did the fighting in New Jersey."

Byrne showed his self-deprecating side by quoting a poll taken after he had instituted the state's unpopular income tax. "Ninety-six percent said they knew who I was, and 4 percent said I was doing a good job."

And he explained why New Jersey politicians give each other bear hugs when they greet.

"The reason is to check if the other guy is wired."

Worth the trip

Republican U.S. Senate candidate Dick Zimmer had agreed to debate Democratic Sen. Frank Lautenberg in Atlantic City on Friday morning before the New Jersey Association of Counties. Then

he learned Republican presidential candidate John McCain would hold an event in Burlington County the same morning.

Lautenberg rejected the debate offer — a good excuse for Zimmer to blow off the counties group — but he kept his word to be in Atlantic City at 9 a.m. He addressed the group, then high-tailed it to Pemberton Township to be with McCain by 11 a.m. No speed laws were broken, his campaign said.

Zimmer was rewarded with what sounded like a spectacular, if fleeting, promotion at McCain's appearance. State Sen. Bill Baroni, R-Middlesex, Mercer, introduced Zimmer as McCain's "running mate."

Zimmer later said all candidates on the same ticket are running mates.

"I have not received a call from McCain's vice presidential vetting committee," he said.