



Gloucester County Times

Congressional hopefuls square off

Tuesday, October 21, 2008

By **SEAN C. McCULLEN**

smccullen@sjnewsco.com

GALLOWAY TWP. The two major-party candidates vying for New Jersey's 2nd Congressional district seat squared off in a one-on-one debate at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey Monday night for the first and only time leading up to the Nov. 4 election.

Incumbent Republican Frank LoBiondo attacked his opponent's short-term New Jersey residency.

The Democratic challenger, Cape May City Councilman David Kurkowski, attacked LoBiondo's record.

Several hundred people, many of them union carpenters, packed into a Stockton student lounge to hear from the two candidates.

"Obviously, we underestimated the interest in this campaign," Kurkowski said looking out at the audience during his opening statement.

While health care and the Iraq war and related foreign policy matters were discussed, the debate largely focused on what each candidate feels must be done to bolster America's slumping economy. Ironically, given the setting, the candidates were not once asked about education.

Kurkowski criticized LoBiondo for twice voting against Wall Street bailout bills, including the \$700 billion bill approved by Congress three weeks ago, saying America was at "the precipice of going into depression."

"I would have voted for the bailout program. I would have voted for it twice," he said. "Neither of those bills was a perfect bill, but we were in a very crisised situation in this country. Our credit was frozen. Banks couldn't, or wouldn't, lend to banks. Businesses wouldn't have been able to get the money they need to meet their payrolls."

While Kurkowski felt the second bill included some "taxpayer safeguards," he acknowledged it did contain political pork contrary to his no-pork platform.

LoBiondo responded that the bailout bills didn't provide enough protections for taxpayers, drawing the only applause from the crowd during the debate.

"We are facing a crisis and I did want to do something about it. But anytime Congress has done something fast and big, they've done it wrong, and I think this is an example of where they didn't get it right. We were told, 'Ô\$700 billion, give them a blank check.' With all due respect, I don't think the taxpayer protections were in there."

The Wall Street crisis lent itself to quick action by Congress, Kurkowski countered.

"When a house is on fire ð the way our economy was at a precipice there ð you put out the fire and then you study it later," he said.

LoBiondo stressed that he voted against the bailout bill because it "let go" the Wall Street big wigs while placing an additional \$2,300 burden on taxpayers.

"When the fire truck rolls up it doesn't empty its tank of water on the street, it puts it on the fire, which is what we didn't do," the seven-term incumbent said in reply to Kurkowski's fire analogy. "We should've looked at this. We should have looked at this with due consideration for what loopholes need to be closed."

That exchange was not the final time fire trucks would be referenced during the debate.

Kurkowski cited a recent Today's Sunbeam article in which LoBiondo beamed that he had helped secure funding for a town's new fire truck.

"That's good. We need fire trucks. I've got a plan, he's giving you a fire truck," the Cape May councilman said.

In response, LoBiondo offered a thinly veiled attack portraying Kurkowski as a carpet-bagger of sorts. At a point he made on several occasions during the hour-long debate. Kurkowski moved to New Jersey from Pennsylvania in 2002.

"I'll align myself with the firefighters in this district all day, every day, morning, noon and night. They volunteer in our communities. They make a difference. I'm not sure how they do it in Pennsylvania, but here they put their heart and soul into it," he said.

Kurkowski attempted to link LoBiondo to President Bush, a popular Democratic tactic in races across the country.

"I've never been in lock-step with the Republican Party or my president or the presidential nominee if I didn't think it was right for America," LoBiondo said.

Kurkowski supports Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama's plan for a 16-month U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq so the military's focus can be to hunt al Qaida in Afghanistan.

"I think this has been a terrible mistake. I would be in favor of ending the war at this point. I think (the next president) should give the military leaders a mission to withdraw from Iraq," he said.

LoBiondo, who supports the war effort but has often been critical of the way it was carried out under former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, cautioned that a time table for withdrawal would be reckless.

"If we aren't careful on our withdrawal, (then) we will create a vacuum that the Iranians will fill and we'll have within a short period of time a much bigger problem. I'm thrilled that we've made progress. (Defense) Secretary (Robert) Gates, (Army) General (David) Petraeus have done a fabulous job in getting us on a positive track. We've seen that the terrorists have moved from Iraq into Afghanistan, hence the increase in terrorist activity in Afghanistan."

Barred from Monday's debate were an independent candidate and three third-party candidates. They are Green Party candidate Jason Grover, Constitution Party candidate Peter Boyce, Socialist Party candidate Constantino Rozzo and independent Gary Stein.

Five of the six candidates participated in a debate in Vineland on Sept. 30.

Monday's debate was sponsored by Stockton's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy and The Press of Atlantic City.

John Froomjian, political editor for the Press, and Philadelphia Inquirer reporter Cynthia Burton questioned the candidates.

To see the debate in its entirety, go to Comcast On Demand.

©2008 Gloucester County Times

© 2008 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.