

Abortion splits candidates

By **BRIAN CALLAWAY**

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Abortion is shaping up to be a defining issue as local Republicans seek a candidate to replace retiring GOP Congressman Jim Greenwood.

Considered one of the strongest abortion rights supporters of any political persuasion, Greenwood has made no secret about his belief that Republicans have a better chance of holding the seat if they nominate another pro-abortion rights candidate to replace him.

But Bucks County Commissioner Mike Fitzpatrick, considered by many the party's most likely candidate, opposes abortion rights.

When asked about it, Fitzpatrick is quick to play up his moderate credentials in various areas, including the open space preservation program the county has run on his watch, and his push to do more to prevent domestic violence.

He's also said that while abortion is getting a lot of attention now, voters in the 8th Congressional District - all of Bucks County and small sections of Montgomery County and Philadelphia - will be much more interested in issues like homeland security and the economy as the campaign progresses.

"The abortion issue is a matter of conviction and faith for people on both sides of the issue," he said. "But (the idea is) not to run or focus on one issue, but to be conversant on every issue, and that's what I'm about."

The issue is also one that's more complicated than just being against abortion or in favor of a woman's right to choose, and there is some nuance in how the candidates are approaching it.

Fitzpatrick has stressed his support for measures banning so-called "partial birth" abortions and requiring a pregnant minor to have parental consent before having an abortion, but has declined to say whether he would allow the procedure in situations where the fetus was conceived through rape or incest.

The two other Republicans seeking the party's nod generally support abortion rights.

Dave Denoon, a New York University professor who's worked for the U.S. Defense Department, said he supports the Supreme Court's landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling, which gave women the right to have abortions in the first two trimesters, and in the final trimester if the woman was endangered by the pregnancy.

State Sen. Joe Conti declined to say whether there were any cases in which he wouldn't support such rights, saying



he'd be "happy to go over it," should he become the party's nominee.

Whichever Republican is chosen will face Democratic candidate Virginia Waters Schrader, another supporter of abortion rights. A spokesman for her campaign this week said she would allow abortion up until the point a fetus becomes medically viable, after which she would only allow it if the pregnancy endangered the mother's life.

Local Republican leaders are scheduled to vote on a candidate to replace Greenwood on Thursday. Party leaders said they thought that Denoon, Fitzpatrick and Conti were the only three people now confirmed for consideration, though they said it was still possible another name or two may also be considered.

The abortion issue has come up repeatedly as the GOP prepares to choose who will replace Greenwood on November's ballot.

Conservative groups like the Bucks County Pro-Life Coalition have come out for Fitzpatrick. Most recently, the Young Conservatives of Pennsylvania made public its request to GOP Sen. Rick Santorum - who is strongly anti-abortion rights - to formally endorse Fitzpatrick.

Joe Sterns, the group's vice president of grassroots coordination, said they are pushing Fitzpatrick for several reasons.

But abortion was the issue referenced most in the group's letter to Santorum, and Sterns said it was very important to them.

"We want to refute this idea that just because someone is pro-life, they shouldn't be allowed to be our nominee for a congressional seat - that's ridiculous," he said. "If we're truly a party with a big tent, we ought to welcome somebody who is pro-life, especially when it's someone like Mike Fitzpatrick who has worked so hard ... as a public servant at the county level."

Others, though, have pointed out that Bucks County had abortion rights supporters as congressman before abortion was even legalized.

And other candidates to replace Greenwood say they think that needs to be taken into consideration.

"I do believe that your position on abortion is an important issue to consider," said Conti, viewed by many as Fitzpatrick's main competition for the nomination. "In the discussions I've had with the Republican delegates, the issue has come up more than I would have expected."

Greenwood said he prefers a pro-abortion rights nominee because that would take the issue away from Democrats.

If Fitzpatrick gets the nod, Greenwood said, he'll have to work harder to convince voters he's a more centrist candidate than Schrader.

"He'll have to be viewed as a moderate on other issues," he said. "I would encourage any candidate in the 8th Congressional District not to just go along with the official pro-life organizations, because I think that makes you look extreme."

Fitzpatrick, for one, said he didn't think that would be a problem for him.

"I've received hundreds of phone calls, voice mails (and) reams of e-mail from a very diverse cross section of the community - they have all encouraged my candidacy," he said. "They are fiscal conservatives, they are pro-choice, they are pro-life ... I'm a candidate that will bring them together."

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