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Bucks GOP to pick congressional candidate

Fitzpatrick expected to be tapped, then face Dem Schrader.

By Hal Marcovitz
Of The Morning Call

Bucks County Republican leaders are poised to name Commissioner Michael G. Fitzpatrick the 8th Congressional District nominee tonight, bringing to a close a hectic three weeks that began with U.S. Rep. James C. Greenwood's sudden decision to withdraw from the race.

Fitzpatrick is expected to easily sweep aside state Sen. Joe Conti and economics professor David Denoon, his two challengers in the balloting by 128 Republican officials.

"I'd be surprised if there is much support for anybody other than Mike Fitzpatrick," said former state Sen. Edward L. Howard, a Conti supporter. "I don't have a pipeline into Republican headquarters, but I know the way things operate over there and the composition of the body that is doing the voting."

The 8th District consists of Bucks County and small sections of Philadelphia and Montgomery County. Bucks Republicans, who will cast 121 of the 128 votes, clearly will dominate tonight's meeting. All 121 Bucks County voters have been selected by GOP Chairman Harry W. Fawkes, who is backing Fitzpatrick. The seven other voters will represent Montgomery County and the city.

State Rep. Paul I. Clymer of Sellersville will be one of the voters. Clymer said he knows of no Republican leader from Upper Bucks who intends to vote for either Conti or Denoon.

"I think Mike Fitzpatrick has the edge," Clymer said. "I haven't done a nose count, but in Upper Bucks Mike Fitzpatrick has very good support from the delegation."

Greenwood, a 12-year incumbent, shocked the political establishment in Bucks when he disclosed his intentions to withdraw from this year's campaign and leave Congress in January for a job heading a biotechnology industry lobbying group.

Fawkes quickly threw his support behind Fitzpatrick, but Greenwood hoped to persuade the chairman to back Conti as his replacement on the ticket. In a July 26 meeting with Fawkes, Greenwood argued that the 8th District has never supported an anti-abortion candidate for Congress.

Conti and Denoon support abortion rights. Fitzpatrick is anti-abortion. Greenwood showed Fawkes

results of a poll he commissioned that indicated Fitzpatrick would face a tight race against Democratic candidate Virginia Schrader, an abortion rights advocate.

Fawkes remained steadfastly behind Fitzpatrick, though, and it appears much of the rest of the county GOP organization is staying loyal to the chairman's selection.

Clymer said too much has been made of the abortion rights issue. Clymer, who is anti-abortion, said he has consistently supported both Conti and Greenwood over the years even though he has disagreed with their positions on abortion.

Clymer said, "It's an issue with me, but it hasn't interfered with me supporting the people I want to support." When you get down to the bottom line, Mike has represented the entire county and he has consistently led the ticket."

Fitzpatrick won elections for county commissioner in 1995, 1999 and 2003.

Clymer said he hasn't been contacted by Conti in recent weeks, which surprised him because he serves in Harrisburg with the Doylestown Republican and expected the senator to make a pitch for his support.

Howard, a staunch advocate for abortion rights, said he is concerned that Fitzpatrick could be facing a tough race this fall. He pointed out that before Greenwood's election in 1992, the 8th District was represented in Congress for seven terms by Democrat Peter H. Kostmayer, mostly because the GOP insisted on running conservative candidates against Kostmayer.

"When Democrats run a social moderate and Republicans run a social conservative, it hearkens back to the memories of Peter Kostmayer," Howard said.

Conti conceded that he is facing an "uphill battle" but insisted that he still intends to go through with the vote. "I'd like to say I have 75 or 80 votes but that's not the case," he said.

The senator said, though, that he hopes to talk with Denoon before the meeting in an effort to persuade the economics professor to drop out. Conti said he doesn't think it is a good idea for two candidates to split votes from moderate Republicans.

Denoon bristled at the suggestion.

"I have no intention of dropping out prior to the screening," he said.

Fitzpatrick said he has been running hard since Greenwood publicly announced his withdrawal on July 21. He has established a campaign committee with the Federal Election Commission, obtained pledges from donors totaling more than \$150,000, and even had "Fitzpatrick for Congress" bumper stickers printed with instructions to his supporters to put them on their cars first thing Friday morning.

Still, he remained cautious about declaring victory over Conti and Denoon.

He said, "If I'm successful in obtaining the support of the party, the campaign begins Friday at 7 a.m."

hal.marcovitz@mcall.com

215-230-4930

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