

In 8th, opening shots target taxes

By: **BRIAN CALLAWAY** (Sun, Aug/15/2004)

The suspense over who exactly is running to represent the 8th congressional district has barely worn off and the candidates are already firing shots at one another.

Bucks County Commissioner Mike Fitzpatrick - unanimously approved last week by Republican leaders to replace retiring Congressman Jim Greenwood as the party's nominee - is being attacked by his Democratic opponent for his stance on taxes.

Ginny Schrader's campaign said Fitzpatrick's support for making permanent the large tax cuts approved under President Bush shows he isn't the best person to represent the district in Washington.

"Our question for Fitzpatrick is why does he think that tax increases on a local level are a good thing, while tax decreases at the federal are good," he said. "That's inconsistent."

The criticism was based on Fitzpatrick's approval of the county's 2004 budget, which included a 14.6 percent property tax increase.

County officials blamed decreased aid from the state and rising demands on county services for the increase.

But Brian Welsh, Schrader's campaign manager, said it was naive to think the county's budget problems weren't linked to the federal tax cuts.

"When money gets taken away from one place on a federal level, it has to come from somewhere else, and that then has to be made up on the local and state level," he said.

Fitzpatrick said the Schrader campaign's charges are absurd, stressing that the county's tax increase had nothing to do with the federal government, and that the budget was also approved by Bucks' two other commissioners - Republican Charley Martin and Democrat Sandy Miller.

Schrader "has made reckless accusations without basis that further demonstrate that she doesn't understand how government works," Fitzpatrick said. "I will gladly debate her liberal Massachusetts tax-and-spend perspective any day - I don't think that's an answer."

Schrader, who was born in Massachusetts, has said she supports rescinding the Bush tax cuts for people making more than \$200,000 per year.

Fitzpatrick said Bush's tax cuts needed to be made permanent to help the economy.

He also said Schrader would reimpose the federal estate tax, which he said would be a "crushing blow" to many, including farmers in Bucks County.

Schrader said her criticism focused on Fitzpatrick's income tax stance, not the estate tax. However,

she added, abolishing the estate tax has nothing to do with protecting farmers.

"It protects billionaires like Bill Gates," she said.

Schrader noted the estate tax, which she said won't be fully repealed until 2010, does need to re-examined.

The tax scuffle broke out Friday, a day after Fitzpatrick was named the GOP's nominee to represent the 8th - which includes all of Bucks and small sections of Montgomery County and Philadelphia.

Greenwood announced last month he was forgoing his re-election bid in favor of taking a top job with a biotech trade association when his sixth term ends this year.

And while the GOP nominee has changed, some analysts still think the party has an edge in this congressional race.

"I do think that Fitzpatrick starts out with a pretty big advantage right now," said Amy Walter, an editor with the Washington-based Cook Political Report, a nonpartisan campaign analysis organization. "The candidate with the biggest advantage is the (one) who actually has some sort of political base and name already in the district. It's not something that's easy to buy."

Schrader, a lawyer and Lower Makefield resident, has never held elected office. Fitzpatrick, of Middletown, has easily won election three times as county commissioner.

Walter said Schrader has a better shot against Fitzpatrick than against Greenwood, but she was still judging the race a "likely Republican" win.

Schrader disagreed with that assessment, saying her own name recognition - a crucial issue in any political race - was increasing "enormously," and that she was continuing to raise money to get her message out.

"The same strategy I've had since the beginning is to get to the people, get my message to them that I can represent them, I know where they live and I know how they feel," she said. "My opponent's going to be a rubber-stamp of the right-wing national (Republican) party. If he were to go, he would just have to sign on to their agenda."

But Fitzpatrick said he would act independently if Republican policies weren't best for the district - he cited the Bush administration's environmental policies as an issue where he breaks with national Republicans.

He also played up the fact that he's held elected office for nearly a decade, saying he knows how to get things done.

"I have a real record that shows exactly what I believe," he said. "We are ready to leave no stone unturned in the battle to win the minds and hearts of the voters of the district - and we won't be outworked."

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