

Fitzpatrick's stem cell research stance upsetting to some Bucks voters

Abortion opponent: Candidate 'was pro-life all the way.'

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Of The Morning Call

September 23, 2004

For most of the three decades since the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in the Roe vs. Wade case, Bucks County has been represented by two members of Congress whose steadfast commitment to abortion rights was well-known by their constituents, particularly constituents who disagreed with them.

This year, anti-abortion activists in Bucks County finally thought they had the chance to elect a candidate to Congress who would best represent their feelings. Last week, though, Commissioner Michael G. Fitzpatrick said he would be open to federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, a position anti-abortion leaders did not expect to hear from the Republican.

"I just don't believe it," said Judy Hollewinski, a member of the Bucks County Pro-Life Coalition of Southampton. "He was so pro-life all the way."

Since the Roe vs. Wade case was decided in 1973, the 8th Congressional District has been represented by four members of Congress: Republicans Edward G. Biester Jr., James K. Coyne and James C. Greenwood, and Democrat Peter H. Kostmayer.

All have supported abortion rights, but over the years Kostmayer and Greenwood, the incumbent, have been enthusiastically endorsed by abortion rights groups for their leadership on the issue. Kostmayer and Greenwood are also the two members who have served the longest since Roe vs. Wade — Kostmayer for seven terms and Greenwood for six.

In the summer, Greenwood withdrew from the race to accept a job heading a biotechnology industry lobbying group. One of his organization's priorities is the promotion of federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, which has received little financial support from the Bush administration.

When Greenwood withdrew, he tried to persuade Bucks County Republican leaders to back state Sen. Joe Conti for the GOP nomination, arguing that Conti's support for abortion rights and stem cell research made him more acceptable to 8th District voters. Instead, the GOP leadership selected Fitzpatrick for the nomination. The 8th District is composed of Bucks County and small parts of Montgomery County and Philadelphia.

Last week, Fitzpatrick and Greenwood patched up their differences. They appeared together at a news conference, where Greenwood endorsed Fitzpatrick. Greenwood said he backed Fitzpatrick because of the commissioner's support for open space preservation and commitment to public service, but Greenwood also made it clear that he would not have endorsed Fitzpatrick if the commissioner had not declared an open mind for embryonic stem cell research.

At the news conference, Fitzpatrick said he appreciates the importance of stem cell research, pointing out that his wife once worked as a research biologist. In addition, Fitzpatrick said he would support international family planning programs and would oppose a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

"I'm very shocked, quite frankly," said Joe Mortimer, president of Bucks County's Voices for the Unborn. "We offered to throw our support behind him, but if that's what he stands for, we can't do that."

Mortimer said his organization has about 1,000 members. Hollewinski wasn't sure of the size of her group's membership, but said about 20 people regularly attend the coalition's meetings.

Abortion opponents will probably find it difficult to support Fitzpatrick's Democratic opponent, Virginia Schrader. In fact, Schrader is expected to be endorsed today by the Bucks County Planned Parenthood Action Fund, the political action committee financed by the organization's members. A news release issued by the group says its endorsement and financial support for Schrader acknowledge "that the race has a solidly pro-choice candidate."

In an interview Wednesday, Fitzpatrick insisted that his willingness to accept stem cell research should not alienate him from most abortion opponents. He said he remains committed to opposing abortion and points out that Schrader backs the late-term procedure known as partial birth abortion and opposes laws requiring notification of parents of teenage girls seeking abortions.

"My daughter can't get an aspirin in school without my wife or me consenting," he said. "It shocks me that she won't support a law that would prevent a complete stranger from taking a 13-year-old girl across state lines for an abortion without the permission of a parent. That's extreme."

Schrader was unavailable for comment.

The other candidates in the race are Libertarian Arthur Farnsworth and Constitution Party candidate Erich Lukas. Farnsworth was unavailable for comment. As for Lukas, he said that if anti-abortion activists are looking for somebody to support, he is available.

During the news conference, Fitzpatrick said he would not oppose a woman's right to obtain an abortion in cases of rape, incest and a danger to the life of the mother. Lukas said he was not surprised to hear Fitzpatrick take that position. "He's pro-abortion," Lukas said. "You can't call yourself pro-life and say you would kill a child."

Hollewinski said, though, that Lukas probably won't get much interest from abortion opponents on Election Day. At this point, she said, abortion opponents regard Fitzpatrick as the "lesser of the two evils." If they vote for Lukas, she said, it may deny Fitzpatrick the votes he needs to beat Schrader.

Still, Hollewinski said, given Fitzpatrick's comments last week about stem cell research, she doesn't know whether she would vote for him now, either.

"I really have to think about it," she said. "It's so sad."

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