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Eternal hope: Two Democrats vie for chance to face Rogers

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Eternal hope: Two Democrats vie for chance to face Rogers

By DANIEL STURM

In 2000, Mike Rogers won a squeaker over an equally well-known opponent, Dianne Byrum, when the two state senators faced off for the 8th District seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

But despite barely winning, Rogers instantly became the odds-on favorite to be re-elected in 2002. The district had been redrawn by the GOP state legislature to favor a Republican, which Rogers is, by including Republican areas to the east to offset the strongly Democratic city of Lansing. Add to that the power of incumbency and Rogers scared off any big-name Democratic from taking him on.

And win he did in 2002 □ big time. Rogers beat Lansing lawyer Frank McAlpine by 85,000 votes, compared to beating Byrum by 160 votes two years earlier. The trend appeared likely to frighten away any Democrat from facing Rogers this year.

But hope springs eternal. Not only will Rogers have a Democratic opponent, but there will actually be a primary battle in August for the opportunity to be the underdog.

The two are Matt Ferguson, until recently a news staffer at WKAR radio, and Bob Alexander, a Lansing peace activist.

Both men are counting on a backlash against Republicans in a presidential election year to give them a fighting chance against Rogers.

Alexander, an East Lansing resident who plans to file soon, said he will appeal to Democrats, Republicans and independents who, like him, are outraged about Rogers' support for large-scale military spending.

He said that Rogers presents himself as a moderate when in reality he has compromised his fiscal responsibility to constituents. "He has betrayed the people who voted for him."

He criticized the congressman's "hypocritical" support for the war in Iraq. After returning from a congressional

delegation trip to the Middle East in 2002, Rogers publicly stated his opposition to U.S. military intervention in the region. "But one month later he voted for the war resolution [in Congress] and today still believes there is a connection between Saddam and Al Qaeda. He thinks there are weapons of mass destruction still to be found in Iraq," Alexander said. "Either he's very devious, or somebody has written a speech for him."

Alexander, an adjunct instructor at Davenport University, most recently served as state campaign manager for Democratic presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich. Two years ago, he managed McAlpine's campaign against Rogers. Alexander has been a driving force in the Greater Lansing Network Against War and Injustice.

Ferguson has already filed his candidacy. Ferguson became a passionate critic of Rogers and Bush at around the same time as Alexander. But as a journalist, Ferguson abstained from voicing his political views.

Ferguson said the Republican Party's destructive politics ultimately drove him to leave his journalism job. "Day after day, you keep seeing these headlines of issues where the administration has misled the American people. And after watching this long enough, I decided I needed to take a more active role in the process."

While working as a reporter, Ferguson said he interviewed Rogers several times, and they were on a first-name basis. Similar to Alexander's contention, he said that while Rogers appeared to be a "personable guy," beneath this he represented a frightening trend in current politics, namely a lack of respect for the separation between the different branches of government. "The thing that really came across to me was how similar the things Mike Rogers said were to the daily spin put out by the White House. You hear something from Ari Fleischer [the former White House press secretary], and five minutes later it would be coming out of Rogers' mouth."

Ferguson said that Rogers' close relationship with the Bush administration □ this week Rogers left for Iraq for the third time since the beginning of the U.S.-led occupation □ presented a real problem for him, given the many "deceitful and absolutely disgraceful things that have come out about how the Bush administration has been running things."

Ferguson and Alexander hope to raise at least \$100,000 each in campaign funds by November (Rogers raised \$1.6 million last time, McAlpine \$11,800).

Ferguson said timing was key to beating the incumbent. McAlpine's election campaign had started in June, which was too late to catch up with Rogers.

Alexander said he thought voters were more upset now about Republican politics, giving a clear advantage to a Democratic candidate: "Back then we hadn't felt the full negative effects of the disastrous economic policies of Bush and Rogers. The health care crisis was bad, but not as bad as it is now."

The two hopefuls for the 8th congressional district seat had nothing negative to say about each other.

Ferguson has been endorsed by Lansing Mayor Tony Benavides, state Sen. Virg Bernero (D-Lansing), Ingham County Prosecuting Attorney Stuart Dunning III and former state Rep. Lynne Martinez. Bob Alexander has endorsements from former state Rep. Bus Spaniola, Ingham County Drain Commissioner Pat Lindeman and Ingham County Commissioners Debbie DeLeon and Marc Thomas.

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