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Politics makes strange fund-raising fellows

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Politics makes strange fund-raising fellows

Dem opponents work together to raise funds

By DANIEL STURM

Political opponents for the same job don't work together, right? But desperate times call for creative measures, at least in Lansing's 8th congressional district.

Last Friday night, July 9, Bob Alexander and Matt Ferguson, who want to be the Democratic nominee to challenge incumbent Republican Mike Rogers, did the unthinkable in the dog-eat-dog world of politics: They held a joint fund-raiser.

They did it in the heart of Rogers country, in Brighton, Livingston County. Several dozen Democrats attended the function, in the home of Jim and JoAnne Swonk. When they arrived, they were greeted by a piggy bank for each candidate.

The consensus among attendees was that defeating Rogers was more important than squabbling over political differences on the Democratic side.

As odd as this strategy might seem for anyone used to the normal elbow nudging and smear campaigns of a political race, there's something to be said for it when one considers the Goliath the two candidates are attempting to oust.

When first elected to the 8th congressional seat, Rogers won by a thread over his well-known opponent, Dianne Byrum, when the two state senators faced off in 2000.

Under a Republican-led state legislature, the boundaries of the 8th district were redrawn to favor a Republican in the next election: Republican areas to the east were incorporated to offset the strongly Democratic city of Lansing. And in 2002 Rogers won - big time. He beat Lansing lawyer Frank McAlpine by 85,000 votes, in contrast to his earlier slim lead of 160 votes over Byrum two years before. Such a record might be enough to frighten any Democratic contender.

But on Friday evening both Alexander and Ferguson were optimistic about the possibility of a Democrat winning the election, due in part to Rogers' close ties to the Bush administration.

Ferguson, 27, formerly a newsman at WKAR, said that there are a very few political differences between himself and Alexander. "It's nothing when compared to Mr. Rogers. Bob and I have the same three top issues. We're talking about jobs, health care, and Iraq. The order of the three varies, depending on the week. Currently it's more Iraq."

Alexander, 59, a retired state worker and a Peace Corps member long active in local Democratic politics, agreed, saying that the real question was only who would be better at pointing out Rogers' shortcomings and putting together a grassroots anti-Rogers campaign effort, without having to spend too much money.

Still, as much as the two Democratic candidates fluffed over their political differences, some do exist.

For example, when asked how they felt about footage in Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11," which showed a defeated Al Gore silencing the attempts of African-American members of Congress to protest the results of the election, their answers differed greatly.

Ferguson said: "For me that's the weaker part [of the film]. They could have had a debate on the floor of the Electoral College on whether the results in Florida were just or not. But when it comes down to it, the votes still would have been the same."

Alexander said: "This testimony was most riveting for me. Not one of the senators supported the African-American members of Congress who demanded a congressional investigation. That was news to me. I'm sure others are also asking our senators, Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenaw, 'How come you didn't support this?'"

Alexander's campaign, which has capitalized on the film's Bush-bashing message, sponsored a Hannah Community Center meeting three days after its Lansing premiere to listen to a live MoveOn.Org discussion with the Michigan filmmaker. Alexander said that of the 200 people in attendance, 60 signed volunteer forms for his campaign. He also handed out fliers at the two Lansing theaters hosting the premiere.

Ferguson's campaign has focused more concretely on attacking Rogers' fund-raising activities. The Republican congressman allegedly attended a fund-raiser at the home of Tom Celani, who according to Ferguson was one of the principal players behind Motor City Casino. "Despite being a vocal gambling opponent, Rogers accepted \$25,000 from Celani as the finance chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee," Ferguson stated in a news release issued in Brighton over the 4th of July weekend. The 27-year old political newcomer asked Rogers to resign from the committee and "return his full attention to the critical needs of Michigan's working families."

Rogers' shortcomings became the focal point of the question-and-answer session that followed the two candidates' speeches Friday evening. A discussion brewed over the congressman's supposed acceptance of a \$25,000 contribution from Waste Management, a company that owns several landfills in Michigan and accepts waste from Canada. As one guest at the forum put it, "Rogers is taking money from one end, and screwing the public at the other, and smiling while he's doing it." The man asked how the Democratic Party could best expose the Brighton congressman as "the phony" he really was. A woman wanted to know if either candidate planned to attack Rogers on the money issue, in case the question came up during the election campaign.

Sylvia Warner, Rogers' spokeswoman in his Washington office, said, "These candidates are making wildly inaccurate statements in an attempt to get attention for themselves in their own primary."

Warner said Rogers attended a fund-raiser at Celani's house in his role as finance chairman for the National Republican Campaign Committee. Federal Election Commission reports show the committee accepted a \$25,000 donation from Celani.

Asked whether he accepted a \$25,000 contribution from Waste Management, she said, "That falls into the same category: wildly inaccurate."

Alexander said he believes voters won't support a "shrill" attack person. "They want someone who's reasoned and who can talk quickly," he said. "All of us have to get involved - not just us candidates - talking to friends, talking to the media and showing up at school board meetings, asking: 'Why are we cutting teachers?' Michigan has lost \$2.7 billion of our taxes to the federal government to support the war and the occupation. Wouldn't it be better to keep this money here in this state, and take care of education, the environment and the roads? This will be a challenge to Rogers."

When asked how he felt about "attacking" Rogers, Ferguson replied: "I would say 'How are we supposed to take you seriously on the Canadian trash issue, when you're taking money from these companies? How are we supposed to take seriously the thought that you're doing what's best for the church, when you're taking money from Haliburton? The facts speak for themselves, and people are going to get it.'"

Another element that may weigh on voters' decisions at the polls is the difference in age between the two candidates. In attempting to balance this, Ferguson expressed appreciation for the political experience of his older opponent. For his part, Alexander shaved his full beard down to a mustache. When asked why, he said jokingly, "I'm running against a young guy, after all."

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