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- Rustin Gudim

State Senate candidates highlight their differences at Aspen stop

BY SCOTT CONDON,

State Sen. Gail Schwartz is banking on her record over the last two years to earn re-election — and that's just fine with her competitor, Bob Rankin, who is using that same record to try to unseat her.

Schwartz, a Democrat from Snowmass Village, and Rankin, a Republican from Aspen, squared off in a debate Wednesday at the St. Regis in Aspen. Schwartz has represented the sprawling Senate District 5, which includes Aspen and stretches from Delta County in the west to the Colorado-New Mexico border and over the Continental Divide, for four years.

Schwartz, who has lived in the valley for 38 years, upset a Republican incumbent in 2006.

Rankin is a small-business entrepreneur and newcomer to politics. He has lived in Aspen since 1995.

Schwartz on Wednesday avoided mentioning her party affiliation and leadership position with state Democrats. The party's candidates are generally expected to face a tough time in the midterm elections next month. She focused on her work in helping create a new energy economy based on renewable energy and her ongoing efforts to secure funding for education.

Rankin wasn't about to let her steer clear of her fellow Democrats, particularly President Obama and U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

"The Obama-Pelosi agenda is quickly and tragically taking this country down the wrong road," Rankin said. He claimed the Democratic leadership in Colorado, including Schwartz, is following the same path.

"We're a western echo, in my mind, of the Obama-Pelosi policies. And I think we need to change that," Rankin said.

He acknowledged that campaigning for office the last year has been a "hoot." And the challenger wasn't shy about labeling himself a "constitutional conservative" despite Aspen's deserved label as a liberal stronghold. The Aspen Business Luncheon crowd was potentially his most receptive audience possible in town.

“I believe in limited government, personal responsibility and personal freedom,” he said.

Rankin found a clever way to deflect campaign criticism that he would be a mouthpiece for the gas and oil industry. A political group known as a 527 that is opposing Rankin but is unaffiliated with Schwartz labeled him “Big Oil Bob.” He said the label is unwarranted, but he could accept the name “Big Coal Bob” because he supports coal miners in the Senate district.

Rankin complained the Democratic-controlled state government has created too many regulations on the state’s oil, gas and coal industries. He cited a bill that required Xcel Energy to replace a coal-fired power plant with natural gas.

“Right now the businesses in our state don’t see us as very friendly to them,” he said.

As a state senator, he would support the existing industries, rather than trying to create a new energy economy. Rankin said renewable energy is a “non-sustainable thing to base our economy on” because it depends on subsidies and tax credits rather than market forces. That’s probably the greatest difference between himself and Schwartz, he said.

Schwartz fired back that the number of jobs created in the clean energy fields in the last five years has exceeded the number employed in the coal industry. Development of solar energy alone in coming years will create 23,000 jobs in Colorado, she said.

Diversifying the state’s energy portfolio is simply a smart move to expand the economy and help Colorado “grow” out of this sluggish period, she said. She dismissed her foe’s suggestion that she favors renewable energy over the traditional fuels economy.

“This isn’t one over the other,” Schwartz said. “This is simply getting smart and utilizing our higher education institutions [and] our technology sector. We’re fifth in the nation in venture capital investments.”

She also noted that Forbes has ranked Colorado among the top four states in which to do business. That’s a far cry from Rankin’s suggestion that state government has chased away business, she suggested.

Schwartz sponsored or co-sponsored nine bills tied to renewable energy, according to her website. One of the most significant was boosting Colorado’s renewable energy requirement to 30 percent by 2020. She is chair of the Senate Local Government and Energy Committee.

A statement on her website dovetails with the sentiments she expressed at Wednesday’s forum: “As your State Senator, I will do everything possible to create economic incentives and develop policies that will unleash the potential that renewable energy holds for the energy-rich counties of the 5th Senate District, including bio-fuels, bio-diesel, ethanol, hydro, wind and solar power.”

Rankin said he doesn’t see it as government’s role to create jobs. “To me it comes down to, do you trust the government to create jobs or do you want tens of thousands of small businesses to hire one person at a time?” he said. “For me it’s clear – we need to work to get government out of the way, we have to incentivize the free market. There are plenty of things we can do.”

New energy economies and stimulus plans “just aren’t going to get us there,” Rankin said. “We need to restore some sanity to fiscal management at the state level, and then we need to increase revenue by turning the free market loose.”

In one of their few areas of agreement, both candidates expressed opposition to proposed state Constitution Amendments 60 and 61 and Proposition 101, which voters will decide in November. All

three proposals would drastically cut state and local governments' taxing abilities.

The proposals will “bankrupt the state” if they are approved, Schwartz said. “We will be a Third World [country].”

Rankin said he will vote against the proposals, and he is recommending others to do so, although he sympathizes with the anti-tax frustration that led to them. “They are the wrong approach, but, boy, do I understand,” he said.

Their agreement on that issue aside, Rankin said voters should have plenty of ammo to make a decision in the race.

“I’m telling voters, decide who you agree with and make a decision,” Rankin said.

scondon@aspentimes.com

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