

Divided over taxes, health No-tax pledge, health program split GOP governor's race

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Byline: John Patterson, Daily Herald State Government Editor

Body

SPRINGFIELD - A promise to rule out tax increases is one of the few fiscal issues dividing the four major Republican candidates for governor.

Both Bloomington state Sen. Bill Brady and Sugar Grove dairy magnate Jim Oberweis vow there will be no tax increases if either is elected governor, a pledge that's become politically popular in recent elections.

"I will not support, nor will I sign, any increases or expansion of the state income tax and state sales tax," Brady said in responding to a Daily Herald questionnaire regarding the candidates' views on taxes and state budget issues.

However, state Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka of Riverside and millionaire Chicago businessman Ron Gidwitz both refused to take such a pledge.

"I believe 'no-tax' pledges are phony and meaningless. I have not and will not take a phony pledge. Governors must live within their means, but no person seeking the governorship can predict the conditions he or she will face in the next four years," Topinka said.

Gidwitz called such pledges "gimmicks."

But aside from their different views on tax pledges, all four major GOP candidates agree Illinoisans already pay enough to drink, smoke and gamble and uniformly opposed any increases to so-called "sin taxes."

The foursome also said they'd nix attempts to raise any other state taxes or fees, something done by Democrats in recent years to balance state spending without hitting taxpayers across the board.

All Kids

Whether All Kids, the state's new health insurance program for children, has a political future if there's a Republican governor again divides the four major candidates.

Beginning this summer, any child can get insurance through the state. The cost depends on the family income. The more money parents make, the more they pay. The state will subsidize a portion by implementing managed care savings to other health care programs.

Both Topinka and Gidwitz said they'd keep All Kids.

"I will not stop programs providing health care to those who need it," said Topinka, who suggested there might be ways to make All Kids more efficient.

Gidwitz said he'd impose greater restrictions on who qualifies.

Currently, any child qualifies regardless of family income. Families making \$80,000 or more would essentially be paying full price, and families making more than \$100,000 should be able to find cheaper programs in the private sector.

Both Brady and Oberweis said they'd end All Kids.

"There are some programs ... that I believe are better left to the private sector," Brady said.

Oberweis said the state cannot afford the long-term costs.

Budget fixes

Brady, Gidwitz and Topinka all offered support for requiring the state's health care program for the poor and elderly to switch to managed care, a move studies have suggested could save taxpayers as much as \$200 million.

Brady also called for abolishing the Illinois State Board of Education and replacing it with a much smaller agency accountable to the governor.

Gidwitz said savings could be found in the budget of the state's central procurement agency, which has been the subject of several critical audits about how tax dollars are spent.

Oberweis said he'd eliminate the \$10 million for stem cell research Blagojevich and Democratic leaders put in the budget. He also called for the repeal of a state program that helps immigrants buy homes. And he'd open up state construction jobs to nonunion companies to reduce costs.

Topinka said money is being wasted on state projects of questionable value and said she'd end no-bid consulting contracts.

Pension fixes

All four major Republican candidates said new state hires should either be offered or required to join 401(k) retirement programs rather than the traditional state pension packages.

The state has not kept up with contributions to those plans and the result is a crushing, multibillion-dollar debt that grows significantly each year it is not properly financed.

"Illinois taxpayers cannot afford the long-term costs of defined benefit plans that far exceed our ability to pay," Oberweis said in calling for the switch to 401(k) plans.

Gidwitz also said pensions should not be subject to automatic cost-of-living increases.

Graphic

The governor candidates position on: Taxes and the budget Photo of each candidate included.

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Turnout poses big challenge; Oberweis, Foster head toward a Saturday vote

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Body

If fewer than four in 10 registered voters in Kane County turned out during the hype of the Super Tuesday presidential primary, the two candidates seeking to replace retired House Speaker Dennis Hastert in next week's special election face quite a challenge.

"I'm not optimistic," said Jack Cunningham, clerk of Kane County, about turnout prospects for March 8, a Saturday. About half of the voters in the 14th Congressional District live in Kane County.

Republican Jim Oberweis, 61, of Sugar Grove is competing against Democrat Bill Foster, 52, of Geneva.

"It's certainly an interesting experiment. I hope it benefits turnout because that's certainly good for democracy," said Foster, a former Fermilab physicist.

Every election is about voter turnout, but the circumstances in the 14th District underscore the point.

Oberweis, known for his family's namesake dairy and three unsuccessful runs for governor and U.S. Senate, is hoping to maintain the lock Republicans have had on the district, including more than 20 years under the retired Hastert, who's backing Oberweis.

"I do believe I am very closely aligned with the people of the 14th District," Oberweis, a former investment manager, told the Tribune editorial board Wednesday.

Foster is hoping to ride a wave of Democratic momentum in Illinois to a seat in Congress.

"There are very big policy differences [between us]," Foster said. It is about "whether you favor a continuation of George Bush's policies or whether you think things should change."

The 14th District stretches from western DuPage County to nearly the Mississippi River.

Bush received 55 percent of the vote in 2004 and Hastert received 60 percent in 2006. Despite that leaning, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has sent a mail piece to voters attacking Oberweis on immigration.

Foster, a political neophyte still finding his way on the stump, is campaigning out of the Democratic playbook. He supports a pullout of U.S. troops from Iraq, the universal health-care plans put forth by leading Democratic presidential candidates and rolling back the tax cuts of 2002 and 2003 issued to the top 2 percent of earners and redirecting that money toward middle-class tax relief.

Oberweis is running on familiar Republican themes. He vows to make the Bush tax cuts permanent, to make English the official language of the United States and supports keeping U.S. troops in Iraq for as long as military commanders think is necessary.

Oberweis has proposed that individuals be allowed to invest a quarter of their Social Security benefits in the stock market. He would pay for the voluntary program by requiring participants to forgo benefits until age 72.

With just four weeks between the primary and special election, the candidates are spending big on mostly negative TV ad blitzes.

Both are millionaires and Oberweis has given \$2.3 million to his campaign while Foster, whose wealth came from a theater-lighting company he started as a teenager, has spent \$1.3 million.

No matter who wins March 8, Oberweis and Foster will face off again in November for a full two-year term.

jkimberly@tribune.com

Notes

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Body

CHICAGO (AP) - The cost of the state's outside investigation into a fatal fire at a Cook County government building is expected to be nearly \$2 million, about double the original estimate.

The private consulting team led by James Lee Witt, the former head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, will be at a lab in Gaithersburg, Md., Tuesday to burn an office work station, in the first recent public sign of their investigation. The burn is part of \$50,000 worth of work the National Institute of Standards and Technology is doing for Witt's investigation, said Witt spokesman Morrie Goodman.

But the bulk of the state's money, nearly \$1.7 million, will be spent on salaries for the consultants and their support team, according to a copy of the contract examined by The Associated Press. Hourly rates for Witt and his colleagues range from \$75 an hour to \$380 an hour.

The total cost of the contract with James Lee Witt Associates is \$1.9 million. Witt and Gov. Rod Blagojevich estimated the cost at \$1 million shortly after the Oct. 17 fire in which six people died after being trapped in a smoky stairwell.

It was unclear how much has been spent so far, since bills go to several different state agencies and invoices could be anywhere between Witt's office and the state comptroller's office.

"Six people lost their lives," said Abby Ottenhoff, a spokeswoman for the governor. "Finding out what happened and learning from it is literally a matter of life and death, and we're not going to put an artificial price tag on that."

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) - Signaling potential problems for the governor's plan to overhaul the education system, Senate President Emil Jones called the idea a "radical change" Monday but said he is keeping an open mind.

Jones also questioned a key piece of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's plan - the idea of creating a secretary of education who would be appointed by the governor.

"I don't want decisions to fund education to be made by some political appointee," said Jones, D-Chicago.

The governor proposes gutting the semi-independent State Board of Education and replacing it with a Department of Education under his control. That will eliminate administrative headaches and help local school districts focus more attention on the classroom, Blagojevich contends.

Jones said after meeting with his Democratic members Monday afternoon he's keeping an open mind on the governor's plan, even though he has concerns.

"It's a very radical change, so it's something that cannot be done just like that," Jones said. "You never buy a pig wrapped in a blanket. You've got to see what's in it."

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) - Heading into an election year, state lawmakers have education and the budget on their minds - as well as trivia games, power window accidents, fast food and fast cars.

Lawmakers have filed more than 3,700 pieces of legislation this spring, and sprinkled among them are a few that deal with the obscure and offbeat.

Some attempt to address problems worrying people, such as teen drivers endangering people by chatting on cell phones. Others try to prevent problems, including whether courtrooms can be flooded with lawsuits against fast-food restaurants.

Few of the bills will pass. Even some lawmakers acknowledge they don't necessarily support the bills they've introduced for constituents or friendly lobbyists.

That's the case with a bill that would let doctors prescribe marijuana to patients who have a debilitating condition. Rep. Angelo "Skip" Saviano, R-Elmwood Park, said he sponsored the bill on behalf of some health care workers as a "trial balloon" solely to spark discussion.

Illinois residents looking to sue restaurants that serve fatty foods for contributing to their obesity would be out of luck under the proposed "Commonsense Consumption Act." Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, acknowledges no one has filed an obesity lawsuit against a fast-food restaurant in Illinois yet, but he wants to prevent such complaints from competing with more important matters on crowded court dockets.

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CHICAGO (AP) - Declaring there "are no sacred cows in my administration," Mayor Richard M. Daley fired one of his cousins Monday for his role in a scandal involving \$40 million a year paid to politically connected trucking companies, some with mob ties.

"It doesn't matter who they are or whether they know me, they have to do the job," Daley said in announcing the firing of his cousin Mark Gyrion from a water department job.

Gyrion was the third city official to lose his job in the burgeoning scandal over the no-bids Hired Truck Program, now under investigation by federal prosecutors. The first was Angelo Torres, the former head of the truck program who is facing federal extortion charges. Last week, William Abolt resigned under pressure as head of the Office of Management and Budget.

The scandal erupted last month when a Chicago Sun-Times investigation detailed \$40 million in payments to trucking companies hired by the city, some of which allegedly did little or no work but got paid while city-owned trucks stood idle.

Gyrion's mother-in-law, Naomi Baker, owned one of the trucking companies. The Sun-Times reported in its Sunday editions that Gyrion sold a city-owned dump truck used by the Water Department to a dealer, who then sold the truck to Baker's company, Jacz Transportation Co. Jacz Transportation leased the truck back to the city, The Sun-Times said.

Rich Kinzyk, first deputy water commissioner, said Gyrion should have informed officials that he had some exposure in the scandal. Kinzyk said Monday he "absolutely no idea" Gyrion's mother-in-law was involved with the Hired Truck Program.

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WASHINGTON (AP) - When Congress narrowly passed the first prescription benefit under Medicare last fall, House Speaker Dennis Hastert and the other 10 Republicans in the Illinois congressional delegation flexed their political muscle to push it through.

But the eight GOP candidates running for the Senate seat being vacated by retiring Illinois Republican Peter Fitzgerald are divided over whether the legislation should have been enacted, and they are nearly united in saying that any expansion of the benefits must wait until the cost of the original bill is known.

Businessman Jim Oberweis, state Sen. Steve Rauschenberger and former state Rep. Jonathan Wright say they wouldn't have voted for the measure.

"My main concern is the estimated \$400 billion cost over the next 10 years," Oberweis said even before the Bush administration raised the projected cost to well over \$500 billion.

Rauschenberger said a major flaw is that the legislation would help those who are financially well off.

Wright argues that many of the potential beneficiaries of the government-provided prescription benefit already have drug coverage under pension or other employer-provided plans.

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WASHINGTON (AP) - The Democratic candidates for U.S. Senate in Illinois generally agree the Medicare prescription drug benefit Congress enacted last fall needs to be revised so the government can negotiate lower prices from pharmaceutical companies.

A less costly drug benefit could allow the government to expand the program, they contend.

"We need to be fighting every day for the lowest possible price to every senior," health care executive Joyce Washington said.

Lawyer and former Chicago schools president Gery Chico questions why the drug relief won't take effect until 2006 and objects to its coverage gap for some expenses above \$2,250.

"Let's not do it on the cheap," he said. "Let's not do it late."

In the new law's first year, beneficiaries would pay an estimated \$35 monthly premium and a \$250 deductible. After the deductible, Medicare would pay 75 percent of drug costs up to the initial coverage limit of \$2,250. Beyond \$2,250, beneficiaries would pay 100 percent of drug costs until reaching a catastrophic limit of \$5,100. Medicare would then pay 95 percent of the costs.

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