

Dems Gearing Up in US Senate Primary Campaign

BY STEVE HOWARD

The "he said/she said" in the race to find a challenger to incumbent Republican US Senator Jim Jeffords has begun.

State Auditor Ed Flanagan, and State Senator Jan Backus are already hard at work fine-tuning their messages – and punching holes in their opponent's – in anticipation of a September Democratic primary. Voters in that primary will decide which candidate will go on to battle Jeffords in November.

Both candidates have been down the road to statewide office before. Backus, then a Windham County State Senator, won the Democratic primary in 1994 to challenge Jeffords, losing to him by about 10 percent in November of that year. Backus went on to serve two terms in the state Senate, this time from Chittenden County. Flanagan, who came out in 1995, has also had his share of political fights, having run for state auditor successfully four times.

Now, the battle hymns go something like this: Backus calls herself an ordinary Vermonter, just like you, and talks proudly about her achievements as a legislator, including many efforts on behalf of the gay community in Vermont. Flanagan pushes a more aggressive fighting style, a trademark he has gained while serving as auditor. It's a style, he says, that has resulted in significant public policy gains and a more efficient government.

The candidates have challenged each other's images; in doing so, Backus, may have ruffled a few feathers recently. In an interview with Vermont Public Radio about the effect of money raised for Flanagan's campaign by the Washington DC-based Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, an organization that funds races for openly gay candidates, she described Flanagan as the "advocates' candidate," saying "It is important that everyone knows who pays his bills." Flanagan and some gay activists took offense to that suggestion, calling it irresponsible, and challenged Backus to explain where her campaign funds come from.

"I was asked about the out-of-state gay activists who were contributing to Ed

Flanagan's campaign. I said that it appears that he is getting strong support from the advocates in the gay community. There is nothing wrong with that. It is a good thing that candidates have to file disclosures so we can see who pays their bills. People can also see who pays mine, labor, a lot of Vermont contributors and friends and family," said Backus.

Flanagan called Backus' comment "unfortunate and a disappointment." He said he thought Backus' use of the word "agenda" in describing the reason so many gay supporters would contribute was irrational, given that both he and Backus are strong supporters of civil rights.

"Jan Backus can do better. She used the rhetoric and the stereotyping of the far right," said Flanagan. "Why did she use the word 'agenda,' and how is her agenda different from mine? How am I more the advocate's candidate than she is? Jan used inflammatory words, and she knows better; I assume she regrets it." Flanagan, who would be the first openly gay member of the United States Senate

should he win in November, has vastly outpaced Backus in pursuit of campaign dollars. Flanagan has raised more than \$600,000, most of which came from out-of-state contributors. According to his campaign, much of that has come from gay and lesbian supporters. Backus has far outdistanced the \$25,000 she raised in her 1994 primary campaign; so far, she has more than \$100,000 in the bank for this fight.

And with a large campaign war chest filled with generous contributions from out-of-state residents and a personal financial portfolio greater than most Vermonters', he may have to overcome a sense that he is not enough in touch with average citizens.

"I have served for four terms as auditor – I am proud of my record as a watchdog for consumers and hardworking taxpayers," he said. "I have taken on the insiders, at

life is scheduled around being a member of a citizen legislature, and she balks at those who claim that is not hard work.

"I grew up in Vermont and raised my family," she said. "I worked hard raising my family. I have had many volunteer jobs and I scheduled my life in order to be with my children and in order to serve on a heavy load of legislative summer studies, including prescription drugs and health care," said Backus.

Depending on who wins, the real test in this race might be the strength of the various constituencies that comprise the Democratic base. The election results could be interpreted by some as a show of force by either women or by gay Vermonters coming to the polls to support their candidate in the race. Flanagan and Backus both say they expect to get support from a cross-section of voters.

"In Vermont, there is a real retail level of campaigning. You have to be face-to-face with the voters. I don't see voters in segmented blocks. I

Flanagan: "Democratic primary voters decide who to support based not on what but who you are"

Backus and Flanagan have both turned to out-of-state groups to help them raise their funds. Backus said she is in the process of gaining the endorsement of Emily's List, an organization that raises funds for pro-choice Democratic women running for federal offices and that endorsed her six years ago. Flanagan has already been endorsed by the Victory Fund.

considerable risk, for those who aren't on the inside."

Backus may also have to explain how she claims the mantle of ordinary citizen, and that she is just like the voters whose support she seeks. Outside of the legislature, Backus is not employed, a major difference between herself and the working women she will need to win at the polls. Backus says her

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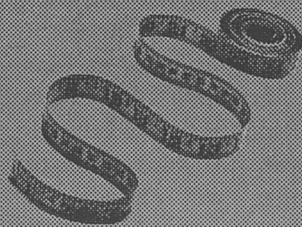
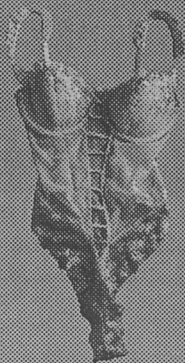
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