

Dems' Fink sets sights on Knollenberg's congressional seat

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER
pmurphy@eccehome.com

U.S. Rep. Joe Knollenberg is undoubtedly a decent person, according to West Bloomfield attorney David Fink.



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BAKER
David Fink

But does he represent the interests of Oakland County voters as he should?" asked Fink.

Fink, the first Democrat to file Statement of Candidacy papers with the Federal Election Commission, a prerequisite for raising or spending money in a campaign for a congressional race.

Fink is expected to announce his candidacy next month, and other Democrats may challenge him for the party's nomination. But he is considering a bid against Knollenberg in the recently redistricted 9th Congressional District that includes Birmingham, Bloomfield Township, Rochester Hills, Troy and portions of Orion and Waterford townships.

Boundaries of the new district are being challenged in court. But as drawn by the Republican-controlled state legislature, the new 9th District includes areas currently represented by Democratic U.S. Reps. Sander Levin and Dale E. Kildee.

"I really don't know if I can beat him (Knollenberg)," said Fink. "But I'm going to find out." Knollenberg was in the district this week but unavailable for comment. Chief of staff Paul F. Welday, however, said Knollenberg, 67, who has yet to announce, is prepared to run against any Democrat or Republican, for that matter — on his record.

That Knollenberg lost some of his old political base because of redistricting is encouraging to some Democrats, who expect the party to be stronger in the 2002 off-year election. A qualified, well-financed Democrat, they say, could have a fighting chance — even against an entrenched incumbent like Knollenberg.

"Dave has a big job ahead," said Debbie Colberg, a party activist in Farmington Hills. "He's bright and articulate, but he has a relatively little name recognition."

Robert D. Nicholson, chair of the Birmingham, Bloomfield

Democratic Club, said his party will have something else in its favor next year. "People are still upset about that last (presidential) election," he said, "and (President) Bush's policies have been horrible."

Don Quixote?

Another Birmingham resident, however, thinks Knollenberg will be too strong in 2002. "He (Knollenberg) has done a good job," said Mary Montgomery, a precinct delegate. "He won't be beaten by any liberal... which is another word for socialist."

"Dave Fink," mused GOP County Chair L. Brooks Patterson, "is he the guy who just legally changed his name from Don Quixote?"

Knollenberg will be re-elected by an overwhelming margin, predicted Patterson, who is also Oakland County executive, "because he's done an outstanding job."

Fink, 48, has never run for public office, although he has been active politically. "I worked for Carl Levin's election when I was 11 years old," he said, "and I've been active in the community." In 1997, for example, he was

appointed to a blue ribbon committee on school finance by the Bloomfield Hills Board of Education.

He was the Oakland coordinator for People Who Care About Kids, the organization that earlier this year conducted a petition drive calling for a statewide referendum on the strict new law on obtaining permits to carry concealed weapons. Fink and other opponents insist the new law makes it too easy to obtain permits and to carry concealed weapons.

"I was horrified when the lame-duck legislature pushed that law through at the 11th hour," Fink said. The drive obtained more than 300,000 signatures, but the Michigan Supreme Court ruled the new law could not be subject to referendum.

Many Oakland voters oppose the state's new gun permit law, said Fink, including some prominent Republicans.

Another factor that appears to favor Fink is his ability to raise money. He has previously been a successful fund-raiser for other candidates, and he is expected to have strong financial support for his own campaign.

"In previous elections, Knollenberg has significantly outspent his opponents," said Fink,

who declined to speculate about how much money he will spend. "He (Knollenberg) may yet outspend me," said Fink, "but I won't be outspent as badly as his other opponents."

He undoubtedly has some things in common with Knollenberg, said Fink. "I think we're both decent people," he said, "and we're both fiscal conservatives."

Differences

But as the campaign unfolds, Fink said he intends to focus on issues that underscore their differences. "I'm definitely pro-choice," he said, "and I'm strongly in favor of campaign finance reform, such as McCain-Feingold."

He also supports "reasonable" gun control measures, Fink said, such as closing the so-called gun-show loophole in existing law. That loophole, he said, enables a person to circumvent the background check normally required for purchasing a pistol by buying them at gun shows.

Asked about Knollenberg's voting record, Welday said his boss supports some form of campaign finance reform besides

McCain-Feingold.

The congressman supports so-called Second Amendment rights, or the right to bear arms," said Welday, "but he also advocates the use of trigger locks and other gun safety measures."

"He's pro-life," said Welday, "and proud of it." Fink expects to get an early start on the campaign, with a heavy emphasis on people-to-people contact. "I expect to speak directly with a lot of voters," he said.

Fink, a 1970 graduate of Oak Park High School, attended Harvard University and graduated magna cum laude in 1974. He graduated cum laude from Harvard Law School in 1977.

His first law practice was out of a small, one-desk office in Detroit, which he shared with former State Sen. Daniel Cooper. That practice evolved into Fink, Zausmer & Kaufman, P.C., in Farmington Hills which has 19 attorneys.

Fink and wife Trudy have two children, Nathan, 16, who attends State Over High School; and Lauren, 13, a student at West Hills Middle School.

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