

Fieger time

Candidate calls himself average citizen

Election '98

■ 'The first priority of this state is to help the safety and welfare of the people; not business, not contributors.'

Geoffrey Fieger
—Candidate

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"Everybody Loves Raymond" was on TV back home, but it was "Everybody Loves Geoffrey" at the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills as Democrat gubernatorial candidate Geoffrey Fieger spoke to a friendly crowd of about 350 people Monday night.

"Fieger is a great leader with strong convictions," said Bernard Gross of West Bloomfield. "There's only one candidate for me; that's Geoff Fieger," said Tracey Martin of Southfield.

"I enjoyed listening to Fieger," said Al VanCreveld of Farmington Hills. "The governor has run one time too many."

"I was impressed with Fieger," said a woman who declined to give her name. "He didn't dodge around things. He was about as focused and direct as he could possibly be."

Fieger was countered on stage by the affable, unconfidential Suzy Heintz, the former Wayne

County commissioner from western Wayne County who has had various posts with Gov. John Engler's administration and with the state Republican Party apparatus. Heintz currently runs Engler's southeast Michigan office.

Fieger characterized himself as an average citizen taking on the political establishment. "I thought I saw every dirty trick in the world pulled on me in a courtroom, and these politicians make lawyers look like saints," he said.

Punctuated by asides acknowledging his obnoxious reputation ("I may be hard to get along with sometimes...") and his occasionally offensive extemporaneous comments ("I've said some things I wish I could take back"), Fieger's overarching theme was that, as governor, he would look out for the needs of ordinary people.

"The first priority of this state

is to help the safety and welfare of the people; not business, not contributors," he said.

No credit for GOP

Fieger gave Republicans no credit for the recent good economy. "We're only getting the crumbs here of a vibrant national economy created by Democrats."

A few minutes later, he predicted economic trouble. "We need to expand the economy to protect it from the coming downturn."

He didn't assign blame for the coming downturn, but asserted that Engler has as much to do with the good economy as he does with the Red Wings' championship.

Fieger charged that Engler's tax reductions "have benefited businesses and millionaires and shifted the burden to working men and women." But he added later that he would consider

eliminating the state's single business tax. "It would be the single biggest stimulant to business in this state, and I would like to see it accomplished."

He criticized Engler for tax policies that permit local governments to attract industry with tax abatements and said Compware, which has made noises about leaving Farmington Hills, represents 25-35 percent of that city's tax base. "Farmington Hills will not be able to fund their police and fire if they (Compware) leave."

(Teri Arbenowake, assistant to the Farmington Hills city manager, reports that Compware's property tax payment is just 0.57 percent of that city's tax revenue. Police and fire protection would not be affected if Compware leaves, Arbenowake said.)

Heintz was received politely by the mostly Democrat crowd, but drew means of protest when she defended Engler's mental health programs, she said, provide "better health care for the mentally ill."

Heintz noted that Engler delivered on property tax reform, which changed a system that had been forcing people to sell their homes because they couldn't afford the taxes.



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL HESSLER

Introductions: Gubernatorial candidate Geoffrey Fieger greeted the crowd at Birmingham Temple Monday night.

Republican speaker

Heintz kept her cool and countered Fieger's assertions politely if at all. Fieger spent much of his time criticizing Engler, but Heintz said nothing critical of Fieger. Her advocacy of Engler was often vague.

As governor, Engler has caused improvement "in terms of everything you can possibly think of," Heintz said. "Listen to what has happened and understand what has happened since John Engler was elected governor. This is a guy I'm proud to be with."

Christopher Glazek, a Bloom-

field Hills resident and Rooper School eighth-grader, said Heintz "couldn't deal with the type of electorate that's here. She was never going to be popular here."

Joey Golden, also a Rooper eighth-grader, criticized the few Republicans in the audience who heckled Fieger. "Engler's cronies were really obnoxious," he said.

One of those Republicans, James Alexander of Oakland County, criticized Fieger's style after the meeting. "This is an election, not a trial," he said. "Suzy did a masterful job, considering the opposition."

Now for sound bites from the candidate and Engler representative

Spoke Fieger

■ "I have a strong personal faith in God, however, I choose not to wear my faith on my lapel."

■ "I'm just an ordinary citizen who believes in doing what's right for the people of this state."

■ "It's what you do that counts, not what you say to get elected."

■ "I may be hard to get along with sometimes, but I'll do what is right, and I keep my promises."

■ "I didn't go to the political school of doubletalk. And sometimes I shout from the hip. But at least you'll get an honest response from me."

■ "Our rights have been put up for sale."

■ "Government has lost touch with the people."

■ "You may not like me personally, but you know I'll fight for your rights."

■ "The governor should be a leader and an advocate for the least powerful among us, not the most. They never need it."

■ "We have to use common

sense, not political sense."

■ "If you think government should be of, by and for the people, consider voting for me."

■ "I'll work harder than anyone would for you."

■ Charter schools and vouchers "will break the back and destroy the public education system."

■ "I believe, philosophically, more taxes mean less freedom."

■ "I won't be complicit. I won't

work behind, and I certainly won't sell you out."

■ "I hear the anguished cries of an entire generation of young African-American men who languish in prison because we have hundreds of millions of dollars necessary to build more prisons but not provide for child care or inspectors for nursing homes."

■ Engler "better hope I don't get rid of welfare because, What's he going to do come Jan. 1?"

■ Engler's Oldsmobile "has long since been lost in a pot hole as big as his you know what."

Spoke Heintz:

■ "I'm proud to be with someone (Engler) who has such a strong moral compass."

■ Engler is running for a third term because "he believes it's important to leave Michigan in better shape than we found it."

Engler plans education push

BY KEN ABRAMCZYK
STAFF WRITER

Gov. John Engler wants to expand on Michigan's strengths — a growing workforce, a strong economy with more manufacturing facilities and more tax cuts.

But Engler wants to continue to push his education agenda to give parents more options through charter schools and his proposed "freedom" schools. During a visit with members of the Observer & Eccentric editorial board, Engler discussed a new reading program geared toward families with infants.

So it goes for the governor on the campaign trail, who hopes Michigan voters will send him back to Lansing for a third term on Nov. 3.

A Beal City, Mich., native, Engler, who turned 50 on Monday (Oct. 12), graduated from Beal City High School in 1966, and received a bachelor of science degree in agricultural economics from Michigan State University in 1971 and a law degree from Cooley Law School in 1981. Engler served in the Michigan House of Representatives for eight years until he was elected to the state Senate in 1978. Engler served as the Senate majority leader from 1993 to 1996. He was elected governor in 1990 and 1994.

Engler said the state has distributed 15,000 new reading kits throughout the state, part of his Reading Plan for Michigan. The kit contains activities parents can do with their children, a book, a child development chart, a list of books, a booklet and videotape of "I Am Your Child" and a children's music cassette.

"We hope to have these in the homes of every infant," Engler said. The kits may be distributed to parents after they leave the hospital with their newborn children.

More parental choices

Engler believes parents need more choices in education, as they would under his freedom schools. Under his proposal, individual schools could secede from underachieving school districts if two-thirds of the affiliated parents voted to do so.

Parents could elect local governing boards with authority to hire and fire administrators and teachers. Engler believes a

smaller sampling of parents electing a school board may be just as — if not more — accountable than the current system, Engler said. Engler used statistics from Detroit to support his idea.

"Of every 10 that enter the ninth grade, three will go down the aisle and get a diploma, and seven will not," Engler said. "That is a rate of failure that is appalling and it has to change. The system has to change."

Engler believes teachers and principals would vote in some cases to take schools and run them separately from the district.

Engler visited the Mackinac Island School District where the superintendent taught classes — a move that gives the district more cash through a savings in staff. Engler also talked recently with a woman who taught in Detroit who had a split class of first- and second-graders with 41 kids.

"I pointed out to her she's generating over \$300,000 in income to her school district just in her classroom alone," Engler said.

"If teaching staffs could in effect run a school and we talk about empowering a schools, well, there's nothing more empowering than to give the teachers the cash. Let the teachers and the principals break away, that's one type of freedom school."

Parents also could petition to "break away" the school from the district and elect their own school board. "I do think it could function with a lot less administrative costs per pupil. I'm not proposing it for only Detroit. We could amend the school code so that anyone could use it."

The biggest barrier to charter schools is finding a location. At any rate, the current system must be changed, Engler said.

"We have a system and have parents who go to court where they try to establish guardianship of their children with an extended family member in another school district," Engler said.

More money available

Schools now have more money available to construct new school



Hesitate: Gov. John Engler says he hesitates to revisit Proposal A.

buildings and purchase new technology since Proposal A's passage. In the 1980s, that total was \$1.5 billion; that figure is now up to \$9 billion in the 1990s.

"I think the public is willing to give some of that property tax relief for some new buildings."

Since Proposal A passed, the equity gap has narrowed among school districts, Engler said.

"I think the fact that we're out of the millage cycle has freed education to get physical plant money and a record amount of technology and investment made," Engler said.

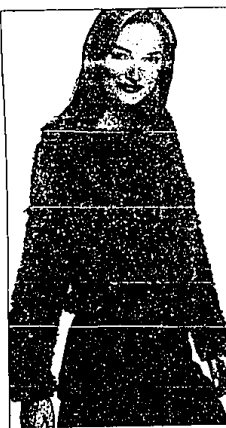
Engler hesitates to revisit Proposal A so that some districts that want more enhancement mills can request higher millages.

"I'm very concerned that the overall frame with Proposal A be maintained, because if it's not, then we're into a situation that every other year, the Legislature changes."

Engler added that state officials "have not yet figured out how to solve that problem" with Proposal A.

GM reorganizes

The number of overall jobs across the state has increased in Michigan, but the Big Three is cutting positions, Engler said. "(GM's) health is important. I think GM needs to be competitive and they need to work hard at that."



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