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For Democrats, a tempting tack to the right

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Candidates anxious in face of angry voters

By Michael Levenson, Globe Staff | August 23, 2010

WALTHAM — Susan L. Fargo, a veteran Democratic state senator from Lincoln, is on the campaign trail armed with a Republican talking point: Repeal last year's sales and alcohol tax increases.

Allen J. McCarthy, a Democratic state representative from East Bridgewater, has been talking about spending cuts, saying voters want to know "we've been tightening our belt, too."

And Jennifer L. Flanagan, a Democratic state senator from Leominster, went to a Tea Party movement meeting and declared herself a "cheap Democrat" in touch with angry voters.

Across traditionally Democratic Massachusetts, Democratic state lawmakers are trying, sometimes a bit awkwardly, to adapt to a perilous political climate, fearing that many voters are skeptical of incumbents, angry about spending and taxes, and hungry for new faces on Beacon Hill.

Facing Republican challengers in swing districts, these Democrats, in addition to trumpeting their accomplishments over the last two years, are trying to burnish their independent bona fides, highlighting times they have stood up to legislative leaders, broken with party orthodoxy, and fought for struggling families.

"What you need is someone who is going to go up there to Beacon Hill and not be afraid of being the person who stands out and says, 'That's it. Enough of the games. Enough of the politics,'" Flanagan declared — without applause — at her first Tea Party movement meeting in Leominster in June.

Republican challengers say the election-year rhetoric is pure political posturing.

"This year, what you're seeing is this move to the center from Democratic legislators who have viable challengers," said Geoff Diehl, McCarthy's Republican opponent, who has the support of US Senator Scott Brown. "I think that's evident nationally, as well as in the state."

Diehl, for example, has been criticizing McCarthy for switching his vote this year to support a Republican-sponsored measure to ensure illegal immigrants do not receive public benefits, which McCarthy voted against last year. Diehl, a member of the Whitman Finance Committee, supports the bill, as do many voters he meets, he said.

McCarthy, a second-term representative, acknowledges he is facing an uphill fight in a district that voted for Kerry Healey for governor in 2006, John McCain for president in 2008, and Brown for US Senate in January. But he insists his reversal on the immigration bill was not politically motivated. He changed his vote, he said, after he became convinced Congress was not going to pass a comprehensive immigration overhaul.

"We've got to send a message to the federal government that we have to do something," McCarthy said.

Fargo, a seven-term senator who fended off a well-funded Republican in 2006, is trumpeting her record of backing public health initiatives, including bills she sponsored to improve school nutrition and reduce substance abuse, which recently became law.

"We had a good legislative season," she told one voter, Caryl Dlugy, as she greeted shoppers outside Shaw's in Waltham last week. "Despite the economy, we're doing better than most states."

But Fargo says she is also proud she defied legislative leaders and voted against last year's state budget because it included higher sales and alcohol taxes. Those taxes are not popular with many in Chelmsford, a battleground in Fargo's district, where businesses compete with New Hampshire. Fargo says she has introduced legislation to repeal the increases, and touts her support for a tax break for seniors and a cut in the gas tax.

"I have always supported cost efficiencies in government," she said.

Fargo will face the winner of the Sept. 14 Republican primary between Sandi Martinez, a three-time candidate from Chelmsford, and Eric Dahlberg, a 32-year-old Chelmsford selectman who has the backing of the Republican establishment.

A self-described "New England Republican" in the mold of Governor William F. Weld, Dahlberg supports abortion rights and same-sex marriage, and accuses Fargo of not being responsive to constituents.

Knocking on doors in Waltham last week, Dahlberg picked up some support, albeit mostly from other Republicans. One woman, Marion Campbell, told him she was fed up with taxes and ethical scandals. She mentioned the photos of Senator Dianne Wilkerson stuffing cash in her bra.

"All the hanky-panky," Campbell said.

"Someone's got to step up," Dahlberg said.

He vowed to serve ethically and step down after three terms, and she agreed to put a sign in her yard.

"We need some young faces," Campbell said, "and handsome ones."

Democrats point out that, despite the desire for new blood, it will be difficult for Republicans to make significant inroads into the Democratic majorities in both chambers.

This year, Republicans chose to recruit a smaller crop of qualified candidates, cognizant that they lost seats in 2004, when Governor Mitt Romney drafted a slew of candidates to run in any legislative race possible.

The quality-not-quantity strategy this year means 96 of the Legislature's 179 Democrats are unopposed and will coast to victory in November, according to a State House News Service tally.

"Most of the members are in a good place," said House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo, a Winthrop Democrat who has been raising money for Democratic candidates. "But with the angst out there and the nervousness out there, I tell members, 'You can't take anything for granted.' "

Indeed, the restive electorate does not always treat Republicans kindly, either.

Dahlberg was excoriated by some members of the Tea Party movement after he backed out of a planned Tea Party rally in Lexington last month. Dahlberg said he withdrew after he learned that Brian Camenker, an activist who crusades against what he calls "the radical homosexual agenda," would be joining him on the stage.

"I have gay constituents and gay relatives," Dahlberg said.

Flanagan is facing a Republican challenger, Neal Heeren, who is pushing a traditional message of lower taxes and reduced spending. "If you tax people less, you'd have more money to invest [and] companies would rather come here to run businesses," Neeren told the Tea Party meeting in Leominster.

Flanagan supports repealing the alcohol tax increase — even though she voted for the budget that imposed the new rate — and has been pointing out that spending on human services and other priorities has been cut deeply in the economic downturn.

"It's important people realize we're trying to do more with less," she said.

Flanagan said she realizes some voters may be angry, but said that in some cases, they seem to be angry at Beacon Hill in general and not at her, leaving this fall's results difficult to predict.

"I got an e-mail from a gentleman who said he loves what I'm doing but everything has to change on Beacon Hill," she said. "I don't know how you put that in the same sentence."

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