



GOP EYEING THREE-PRONGED STRATEGY TO UNSEAT LEGISLATIVE DEMOCRATS

By Kyle Cheney
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, AUG. 24, 2009.....Sales tax, spending and Sal.

Those five words are, in a nutshell, what the state Republican Party hopes is a winning electoral strategy for their 2010 legislative challengers. At its nadir of influence, the party hopes tying incumbent Democrats to a recent 25 percent sales tax hike, a former House leader battling federal corruption charges, and a general discomfort over state spending and local aid cuts will wrest some vulnerable seats back across the aisle.

Although the contests are more than 14 months out, the combination of budget woes and corruption scandals has given Republicans hope that they can reverse years of electoral impotence - the party lost three House seats in the 2008 election, dropping its numbers to just 16 out of 160 state representatives; Senate Republicans held steady last year at five members out of a 40-person body.

"The Democrat incumbents are not representing their constituency. They do not have their constituency's best interest in mind," said Jen Nassour, chairwoman of the state Republican Party, in a phone interview. "Everyone needs to know that their representative ... took the wrong vote on the sales tax and took the wrong vote on [reelecting former House Speaker Sal] DiMasi."

In January, the vast majority of House Democrats backed Salvatore DiMasi for a third term as speaker, just weeks before he resigned amid a federal investigation into an alleged abuse of his official power. In June, DiMasi was indicted for what federal authorities allege was a kickback scheme to enrich himself and his associates. He and his associates are fighting the charges in federal court.

One hundred and thirty-five Democrats voted to give DiMasi a third term. Reps. David Torrisi, Cory Atkins, Jennifer Callahan, Thomas Calter, Stephen Canessa, John Quinn and Thomas Stanley voted "present." Rep. William Greene (D-Billerica) voted for himself.

In addition, with the state facing a dire budget crisis, Democrats in July passed a spending plan that included a 25 percent hike in the state sales tax but still required deep cuts in services across the board.

Democrats say the sales tax hike helped preserve essential services for poor and mentally ill Massachusetts residents. In addition, although the sales tax - combined with a new tax on alcohol and local option taxes on meals and hotel stays - helped them add to the budget's bottom line, they had already moved to rein in spending growth by chopping hundreds of line items. The taxes were also meant to bolster the struggling MBTA and turnpike authority and prevent fare and toll hikes for commuters.

"This is an international crisis, and people are not, I don't believe, as angry with their reps and senators because they understand that it's more than Massachusetts. We're just playing the cards we're dealt."

said Sen. Joan Menard (D-Somerset), a veteran lawmaker who has served on leadership teams in the House and under two Senate presidents. "If we didn't do any tax at all, I can't even imagine what the cuts would be. I look at my district. We laid off firefighters, we laid off police, we laid off public works people. We may be laying off teachers. Without that additional revenue, it would've been even worse. We're elected not to get reelected. We're elected to do the job. My colleagues, I have to say, they do what they think is important and necessary."

As for supporting DiMasi, Democrats have pointed out that at the time of the vote no charges had been brought against the longtime North End lawmaker, and only a series of Boston Globe articles had tied him to potential wrongdoing.

Menard, who has previously led the state Democratic Party and was appointed in 1998 as vice chair of the Democratic National Committee, said her colleagues, despite a confluence of challenges, are in a strong position to win reelection.

"I look at the incumbents, and this is up to them. They have to do the job in their district," she said. "There are some big issues, their voting for the sales tax or voting for any tax and not being able to provide the level of services they'd like to. I don't see people who are weak in their districts. They're very strong. They pay attention."

Menard said that with the elections more than a year away, Democrats hadn't yet sat down with incumbents to map out strategies for reelection, a process she said would likely begin in the fall.

"One of the things that we did two years ago was we sat individually with each incumbent and went over what we thought they needed to put their campaign together," she said. "We sat down with them and with each individual senator and said, 'Have you planned your campaign yet? Have you thought about the issues?' Sometimes you forget that you have to run again September. It creeps up on you and it's February or March and you have to get nomination papers done."

State Democratic Party officials did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Republicans feel they can bring a semblance of political balance to the capitol.

Shaunna O'Connell, a GOP recruit from Taunton, is already showcasing the GOP strategy on her web site, www.shaunna2010.com. The home page features a video that begins with an eerie, black-and-white image of the State House dome, overlaid with the words "Shaunna thinks Beacon Hill is broken," followed closely by two phrases: "Raising taxes. Indicted speakers." O'Connell is taking on Rep. James Fagan for the Third Bristol district.

"I think some of the party's themes you're going to see in a lot of campaigns because they do resonate with a lot of people," O'Connell said in a phone interview. "In my town in particular people are very concerned about the way our taxes have been raised by the state and then again at the city level."

O'Connell said Republicans would be better positioned in 2010 than they were in 2008, in part because voters in 2008 were fueled by anger at President Bush and came out in droves to support a Democratic president.

"[Bush] was a Republican and that trickled down into other parts of the Republican Party," she said. "People, with the economy the way it is, with all the corruption stories that we hear coming out of Beacon Hill, people are really focusing in their state government in this election."

Geoff Diehl, a sign company executive and GOP challenger to Rep. Allen McCarthy in East Bridgewater district, has focused on the economic angle.

"I am on the Whitman Finance Committee and I see first-hand that it is very hard to know what funding is actually going to be coming in from the state before each of our towns has to vote in a budget at Town Meeting," Diehl said in an email. "The process causes a lot of hand-wringing and suspicion between town departments, plus it puts each town on potential "stand-by" for an override vote if the state comes up short from their estimates. It's a backwards way of dealing with the people and towns who are the backbone of our state and I, like most every fiscally conservative Republican in office, believe that Local Aid should be the first order of business for Beacon Hill's annual budget."

Republicans have also fielded Brett Schetzle, a member of Beverly's GOP town committee, to challenge Democratic Rep. Mary Grant.

Schetzle told the News Service he intends to hammer on fiscal issues.

"For Republicans, it's a numbers game. In presidential years, there's just a higher voter turnout, and when there's a higher voter turnout, the numbers start to look even more challenging," he said. "I think certainly that the taxes and budgeting issues are winning issues. For me as a candidate, that's going to be the lead thing that we talk about. The people in Beverly don't want new taxes. What we probably need to do a better job of this time as opposed to last time is really bringing it down to the kitchen table level."

"The corruption and the ethics, sure, that plays into it for a certain percentage of voters. For me, it will be less of an issue," Schetzle added. "At the end of the day, I need to convince people to vote for me, as opposed to whoever my opponent ends up being. They don't vote for Beacon Hill. They vote for candidates."

With more than a year until Election Day, the number of challengers is likely to multiply.

"I think the difference today as opposed to past years is that people are very engaged, people are very concerned," Nassour said, explaining the GOP's difficulty in picking up seats in prior election cycles. "You can see the fire in their bellies."

Rep. Brad Hill (R-Ipswich) said the strategy laid out by GOP leaders was accurate and added that Republican candidates planned to create a nexus between tax hikes and job losses.

The state reported Thursday that Massachusetts, where Gov. Deval Patrick campaigned on a promise of creating 100,000 jobs during his four-year term, has lost more than 109,000 in the last year alone.

Senate Minority Leader Richard Tisei says the party is right to focus on issues that people are talking about on the street, particularly pocketbook issues.

"I wouldn't want to be somebody who voted for the sales tax increase right now, given what's going on with the economy. I don't see how that helps you running for office, election or reelection," he said in a phone interview. "I think the party's smart to emphasize things that people care about and they're talking about."

Tisei predicted that economic issues would still be prevalent when voters head to the polls.

"Not having a crystal ball, I think most people comfortably could predict that the economy isn't going to get any better, the state's fiscal problems aren't going to get any better, our job creation record is going to continue to be dismal," he said. "As far as jobs and the economy and taxes ... I'm fairly confident that that's what the election is going to be fought on."

--

ABOUT DISTRICT / CANDIDATE:

The 7th Plymouth District includes all of Abington, East Bridgewater and Whitman. Notable State Representatives from this District include Michael Sullivan, former U.S. Attorney for the District of Massachusetts and former Plymouth County DA, and Andrew Card, former White House Chief of Staff under George W. Bush.

This is the first time Geoff Diehl has run for political office and he currently resides in Whitman with his wife, KathyJo, and their two daughters, Kaylee and Emily. He is a graduate of Lehigh University and is an Account Executive with Poyant Signs. Geoff is also a member of the Whitman Finance Committee as well as the South Shore and MetroSouth Chambers of Commerce. Mr. Diehl is also an Eagle Scout.

CONTACT:

Karli Connors, Campaign Manager
Committee To Elect Geoff Diehl
10 Village Way, Whitman MA 02382
(508) 944-7153 (Cell) / karli@geoffdiehl.com
<http://www.geoffdiehl.com>

###