

## **ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS:**

### **Gas prices, influence, Iraq define Democrats' debate**

#### **HOUSE: Young and Democrats Berkowitz and Benson tackle issues.**

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Alaska Congressman Don Young and the Democrats pursuing his seat sparred over corruption, campaign contributors, the Iraq war and high gas prices Sunday.

"My ethics and my wife's ethics and my families' ethics should never have been questioned," Young declared at the debate held by the Alaska Women's Political Caucus.

Neither of the candidates challenging Young in the Aug. 26 Republican primary appeared at the debate.

Gabrielle LeDoux was visiting with her ailing father in California. Lt. Gov. Sean Parnell -- who hasn't yet been in a debate with Young -- said he had a prior commitment to be at the governor's annual picnic in Fairbanks.

Both candidates competing in the Democratic primary for the U.S. House seat, Diane Benson and Ethan Berkowitz, appeared at the debate, held at the Steinway gallery in downtown Anchorage, complete with piano and violin playing.

Gas prices were a big issue. Young said the best thing to do immediately is advocate better driving practices. He said "shame on you" to people still driving sport utility vehicles.

"I would suggest you follow the speed limit and stop burning the fuel you are burning by driving the big vehicles," Young said.

Young said he drives his 2003 Cadillac slow in Washington, D.C., and "I get waved at a lot with strange-looking hands and I also get honked at a lot, but it works," he said.

Young also said he is pushing a bill to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling -- with federal royalty money from that going to alternative fuels. Young said he's shepherded ANWR drilling through the U.S. House 10 times, to see it die in the U.S. Senate or be vetoed by Democratic President Bill Clinton.

Berkowitz, who said he has a 1993 GMC Yukon and a Prius hybrid, called for suspending the state's gas tax -- something Young has opposed on the federal level.

He also said 80 villages could be equipped with wind power for \$150 million, and Alaska has geothermal, biomass and "80 percent of America's tidal potential."

Berkowitz said he'd "have a voice inside the tent" to advocate for ANWR oil drilling, since it is the Democrats who are in control of both houses of Congress.

Benson, who said her transportation means of choice is a Harley Davidson, said leaders need to work with everyone affected, and not exclude people they don't agree with. Benson said the trans-Alaska oil pipeline would not have succeeded without incorporating the environmental concerns.

"Frankly, a lot of what happens in this discussion is the politicizing of energy ... because of big money is involved in campaigns," Benson said.

#### 'FOLLOW THE MONEY'

Benson questioned Berkowitz, her opponent in the Democratic primary, for taking contributions from the political action committee of Rahm Emanuel, a leading U.S. House Democrat from Illinois.

Some on the left have criticized Emanuel's PAC for including Fox News executives and other big money contributors as donors.

Benson said in an interview after the debate the donors include lawyers that worked for Exxon to reduce the oil spill damages. Her campaign specified later that she was talking about the national law firm Patton Boggs.

Berkowitz -- who has been critical of Exxon -- said he doesn't know who all the donors to Emanuel's political action committee are but is glad to get support from Democrats in Congress. He said he stood up on the floor of the state House and denounced oil field service company Veco's attempts to influence state politics.

He said Veco executives also tried to bribe his opponent in the 2006 Democratic primary for lieutenant governor, Donny Olson, because they didn't want him in office.

"I've been there, I've stood up to powerful forces, I'll stand up to them again," Berkowitz said.

Benson said she doesn't take any money from industry political action committees or lobbyists. Alaska voters need to "follow the money," Benson said.

Young said he finds the animosity toward lobbyists misplaced. There are lobbyists for anti-domestic violence groups, parenting groups, and for cities like Anchorage, Bethel and Kenai that come to him for money the state won't provide, he said.

#### 'IN IRAQ FOR MANY YEARS ...'

Young differed sharply from the two Democrats on issues like the Iraq war.

Young said he supported the president in the invasion. He said the nation was faced with a potential third world war, with Iranian nuclear involvement, if it didn't act to do something about Saddam Hussein. He said a withdrawal from Iraq would mean genocide.

"Whoever is president, you will see a presence in Iraq for many years to come, just as we have in Korea, just as we have in Germany," he said.

Young said the problem was America didn't recognize the history of Iraq and its factions.

Benson, whose son lost his legs in Iraq, said ignorance by the leaders was no excuse.

"It's a good example of why we need better funded schools. They should have had a clue what they were getting into," Benson said.

Berkowitz said Congress surrendered its power to wage war and gave President Bush a "blank check" in Iraq. "That should never have happened ... our equipment is short, stop loss is just beating the crap out of our soldiers, and that's not right," he said.

Berkowitz and Benson also were critical of Young's vote in favor of legal immunity for the phone companies that cooperated in the National Security Agency wiretapping program.

Young said it was a bipartisan bill and the companies shouldn't be held responsible for something the government asked them to do in a time of crisis.

Berkowitz and Benson have said phone records should not have been "illegally" handed over to the government. Giving the companies retroactive immunity violates the separation of powers between the judicial branch and Congress, Berkowitz argued, while Benson assailed the "Bush Democrats" who supported it.