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Blog: McCollum pitches himself to tea party activists

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06/30/2010
Sun Sentinel - Online
Man, Anthony

Republican gubernatorial candidate Bill McCollum won applause from hundreds of tea party activists Wednesday evening with his conservative-themed stump speech.

The speech, which lasted a little more than 20 minutes, differed little from his standard campaign speech. Even the 30-minute question and answer session included many of his standard lines.

Many of the almost 300 tea party activists gathered at the South County Civic Center west of Delray Beach liked what they heard.

He won strong applause when he said he favors the Arizona-style immigration law and hates the new federal health care law, which he called "the largest single power grab by the federal government" in his lifetime.

Though he's running for governor, tea party activists are especially concerned with federal issues. And McCollum, the current state attorney general and a former congressman, devoted much of the early part of his speech to federal issues: reducing the size of the federal government, reducing capital gains taxes, reducing corporate taxes, reducing regulations on business.

McCollum took a few jabs at mega-millionaire gubernatorial candidate Rick Scott, who's pumped millions into TV ads, turning what was an all-but-guaranteed-nomination victory for McCollum into a too-close-to-call battle.

"I have an opponent who has millions of dollars he can say whatever he wants out there. And he doesn't tell the truth all the time," McCollum said.

McCollum said cutting taxes is key to improving the economy. And he made a pledge bound to upset local government leaders, calling for a "two year time out" during which as governor he would ban local governments from increasing tax rates.

The audience didn't like all of McCollum's answers during the Q&A session. One questioner wanted to know if he thought Gov. Charlie Crist, who left the Republican Party to run for U.S. Senate

with no party affiliation, should return campaign contributions he received from Republicans while he was a Republican.

McCollum gave a long answer about "a sense out there that we should kick all the bums out" and touting the value of his own experience. And he promised "there'll be a new breath of fresh air in Tallahassee."

McCollum thought he was done with the question – until some in the audience yelled out that he hadn't answered the question.

At that point he did answer directly, saying Crist should return contributions to anyone who wants their money back.

He also avoided a firm answer on the proposed Crist administration-South Florida Water Management District deal to help restore the Everglades by buying land from U.S. Sugar.

He said there wasn't a way to "pay the kind of money that's out there on the table," said he wouldn't favor any water management district tax increases to pay for the land buys, and pledged to work on restoring the Everglades. But he didn't specifically say what he thought of the deal.

McCollum evidently wasn't as angry on Wednesday as he was on Monday. Speaking to the Broward Republican Party at the beginning of the week, McCollum said more than five times that he was angry at the way President Barack Obama was handling the Gulf oil spill and the economy.

On Wednesday, McCollum described himself as angry only four times (including one "really angry").

McCollum Leaving Many Questions Unanswered

06/28/2010

Ledger, The
Fineout, Gary

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TALLAHASSEE | Republican gubernatorial candidate Bill McCollum strode before a group of newspaper editors and publishers June 17 in Sarasota and boldly proclaimed that, if elected to the state's highest office, he would impose a two-year freeze on tax rates for every local government in Florida.

When pressed for details, such as how his plan would affect schools and whether it would usurp local control of cities and towns, McCollum promised that he would spell it all out the next day.

He did not. Instead his campaign put out a vague press release that left as many questions as answers about a plan that, if enacted this year, would force local governments and schools to reduce spending by \$3 billion.

Since then, McCollum has talked little about the tax rate freeze.

It seemed like a political mistake, pitching a far-reaching plan without having the consensus and details to sell it. The irony is that McCollum is anything but a newcomer, having held elected office for most of the last 30 years, from Congress to his current job as Florida attorney general.

McCollum's campaign has tried to portray his GOP opponent, Rick Scott, a health care executive who has never been elected to office, as someone that voters cannot rely on during such challenging times.

"They don't need a rookie up here running this place who doesn't know what Tallahassee is and what state government is all about," McCollum said earlier this month, referring to Scott.

Yet it is McCollum's campaign that seems to have struggled to show the strength of the candidate's experience.

FALLING BEHIND

For example, one of the cornerstones of campaigning is to define your opponent, not let your opponent define you. But the McCollum campaign essentially sat back for several weeks as Scott spent up to \$14 million of his own money on a TV advertising blitz. The ads vaulted Scott from a virtual unknown to a lead in recent polls.

Scott used the airwaves to portray himself as a fiscal conservative and defend his tenure with Columbia/HCA, which

was involved in one of the largest government fraud cases in U.S. history. Scott also attacked McCollum for saying the anti-illegal immigrant law passed in Arizona is not needed in Florida.

With about eight weeks to go before the Aug. 24 Republican primary, the McCollum campaign still has time to change the trajectory of the campaign. Because of Scott's vast wealth - he has already spent nearly three times more of his own money than McCollum has raised from donors - it is unlikely that McCollum can match Scott dollar for dollar.

But McCollum does have strong support from Republican Party stalwarts, including popular former Gov. Jeb Bush. With the prospect that McCollum and Scott could have four public debates before the primary, McCollum would have a chance to make the case that Scott is too inexperienced to lead the state.

To do so, however, McCollum can't afford repeats of his plan to freeze local tax rates or his apparent flip-flop on the Arizona illegal immigration law.

McCollum has said little about schools, health care or how he would balance Florida's looming budget shortfall. Instead he repeatedly said details would come later or he was waiting to hear from advisory groups he has assembled. When asked recently whether he supported a 2009 bill to deregulate property insurance rates, he would not say. He said he needed to be "careful" because "I want an open playing field when I'm governor to deal with this. I'm going to deal with it; we cannot duck around it any longer."

DETAILS MISSING

Back in March when McCollum announced his plan to sue the federal government to block health care reform, he flatly said it was "not his job" as attorney general to lower health care costs or deal with Florida's millions of uninsured residents. McCollum promised that he would unveil his own health care proposals. He has not.

And when McCollum has come out with some policy initiatives, he has left key details unanswered. McCollum in early June unveiled his plan on how to meet Florida's water needs, but it did not say whether he supports the transfer of water from water-rich North Florida to other parts of the state. (He is opposed to the idea).

That same water plan called for continued restoration of the Everglades. But he would not say this week whether he supports the plan pushed by Gov. Charlie Crist to acquire land owned by U.S. Sugar Corp. Instead he noted that the plan is still tied up in legal challenges and "we will know a lot more when I'm governor."

McCollum said he wants the flexibility to consider different options and not start out with "proposals to offend someone" on controversial items such as property insurance or property taxes. McCollum says he wants to build consensus once he is elected.

TESTING LOGIC

But in proposing to freeze local tax rates, McCollum is testing his own logic. Such a freeze could be divisive because it would essentially force local governments and schools to make huge cuts because property values have been declining.

McCollum said between now and the Aug. 24 primary, he will reveal more details about where he stands on education and transportation.

Rick Wilson, a veteran campaign consultant for Republicans in Florida and across the nation, insisted that McCollum has a "long, clear conservative record that lets people know the overall approach" that he plans to take.

"Bill has a strong brand identity as a conservative, so there's less pressure on him to lay out nuts-and-bolts details," Wilson said.

Instead, Wilson said the pressure will soon mount on Scott when he has to run through a "policy minefield" during every debate or interview.

Although Scott has waged a largely television-based campaign, his campaign says they are ready to charge into that minefield.

OP-ED: Bad data must not stop crucial Everglades land buy

06/22/2010

News-Press

Ray Judah

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A recent guest opinion by George Wedgworth, president and CEO of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, to discredit state purchase of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corporation land south of Lake Okeechobee was deceitful and fundamentally flawed.

Mr. Wedgworth suggests that the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan will adequately address the need for storage and treatment of polluted water released from Lake Okeechobee that has caused adverse impact to coastal estuaries on the west and east coast of South Florida.

Unfortunately, the Central and South Florida Flood Control project model used as the basis for Everglades restoration under CERP is seriously flawed because the model incorporated data collected from a 30-year dry cycle between 1965-95. The South Florida Water Management District underestimated the need for water storage to restore the Everglades and properly manage Lake Okeechobee.

An evaluation of the annual water budget for Lake Okeechobee is another cause for alarm when considering the total storage capacity of the reservoirs and storm-water treatment areas to be built under CERP. Annually, approximately 4.7 million acre feet of water enter Lake Okeechobee by inflow and rainfall, with 2.4 million acre feet of water lost to evaporation. The cumulative amount of storage expected to be provided by the additional reservoirs and storm-water treatment areas under CERP is approximately 800,000 acre feet of water. Another 500,000 acre feet of water is used by agriculture, indicating a need for an additional 1 million acre feet of water storage to minimize the devastating impact of excessive fresh water releases from Lake Okeechobee.

The SFWMD proposed plan to build 330 aquifer storage and recovery wells around the lake to store the excess water would cost in excess of \$3 billion. The uncertainty of injecting water below ground raises serious questions as to the recovery rate and release of arsenic, contaminating ground water supplies.

Mr. Wedgworth suggests that the SFWMD Acceler8 efforts focused on building reservoirs such as C-43 on the west coast will benefit the Caloosahatchee River. Unfortunately, the design of the C-43 reservoir does not include a water quality component, and will serve as an incubator for bacteria and toxic blue-green algae that is becoming more prevalent in the Caloosahatchee River and creating public health concerns. Heavy nutrient loading of phosphorus and nitrogen, warm water, and limited circulation in the reservoir create an optimum environment for the proliferation of bacteria and algae. The use of aerators in the reservoir to enhance circulation prevents nutrients in the water from settling to the bottom, causing nutrients to remain in suspension, resulting in further degradation of our coastal estuaries.

Mr. Wedgworth further comments that "the lake and estuary problems are not caused south of the lake" when, in fact, the sugar industry uses hundreds of thousand of acres of publicly owned lands south of the lake, known as storm-water treatment and water conservation areas, to treat and store water from their sugar cane fields, thus depriving the use of these publicly owned lands for treatment and storage of excessive surface water runoff from Lake Okeechobee.

For decades, Lake Okeechobee, a public resource, has been managed by the SFWMD to ensure adequate storage and water supply to meet the irrigation needs of sugar cane producers. In periods of high water, the sugar industry has been allowed to back pump into Lake Okeechobee to avoid flooding of sugar cane fields resulting in excessive nutrient discharge of phosphorous and nitrogen in the lake. During periods of low water, the SFWMD has historically reserved water for irrigation of sugar cane fields and eliminated minimum fresh water flow to our coastal estuaries.

The current SFWMD Governing Board is at long last representing the public interest and recognizes that the purchase of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land is a landmark decision to restore the Lake Okeechobee watershed and Florida Everglades.

OP-ED: 'Nice Guys,' Big Sugar stand in way of true Everglades restoration

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06/18/2010

Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers

Karl Wickstrom

An old, somewhat cynical saying is "Nice guys finish last."

Don't count on it.

In politics, we find that nice guys of no substance too often finish first.

Last month we warned about the Bright Greenies. These are the extremists who rail against fishing and hunting even as they munch on animals they apparently think emerged from nowhere.

The nice guys, to us, are similar in their smiling hypocrisy.

Just when we most need straightforward, honest commitments, we get hugs and laughter and inane promises that at first blush seem just fine.

Recently, several of us lunched with a handsome young millionaire who found himself in high office. Full of friendliness (and another substance), he pledged to assign his staff to work closely with us and, it seemed, work for our goals.

"He's a nice guy," a friend murmured to me.

As we broke up, all smiles of course, I asked the pol if he would seek to reduce the government's support of Big Sugar.

"Well," he said after pausing. "I wouldn't want to go up against all their money."

And thus we knew that the jillionaire sugar barons would keep their stranglehold on Florida, the subsidy giveaway being one of our more sacred traditions.

I immediately thought back four decades to our most powerful politician's cozy ties to Big Sugar, enjoying a seat on the board of the biggest sugar company as well as a mega-mansion in the Dominican Republic.

Meantime nowadays, ordinary folks pay \$2 billion extra for sugar at the supermarket to help prop up an unneeded and destructive industry that profits from a ridiculously low import limit set each year by the friendly U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Occasionally, a renegade limb of the media will make a peep about the sugar scandals. But the industry Nice Guys know how to snuff out such peeps. And on it goes.

So we're left helpless and hopeless against the big private profits and smooth public relations of the type that once convinced everyone that the best doctors smoke and recommend cigarettes. For a superb and amusing exposé of the public relations industry, read "Toxic Sludge Is Good For You" by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton (check a bookseller or search engine.)

Well, we're not quite hopeless right now, because for a combination of reasons, U.S. Sugar is willing to sell its farms at a reasonable price for Everglades restoration. The acquisition could provide for a critically needed flowway south from Lake Okeechobee, bring back groundwater and save marine life on both coasts from the assaults of excess freshwater that destroy estuaries.

There's simply no other alternative to save the 'Glades.

Only the Nice Guys and their Pollution Establishment stand in the way.

Wickstrom is founder of Stuart-based Florida Sportsman Magazine, which will print this column next week.

