

## Lehigh Acres resident enters Florida Senate race

By CHARLIE WHITEHEAD

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New Republican challenger Matt Caldwell is running for the Florida Senate District 27 seat now held by Democrat Dave Aronberg, because he believes Lee County should have its own senator.

Aronberg says it's more about an unwritten Tallahassee rule and an east coast Senate race.

Caldwell qualified to run Tuesday. He's lived in Southwest Florida since 1982, and he graduated from Edison College and FGCU. He manages the residential division for Maxwell & Hendry Valuation Services, a Southwest Florida appraisal firm. He's a member of the county Republican Executive Committee and its Golden Goose subcommittee, which has criticized Lee County spending habits.

Caldwell also served on the county Smart Growth committee and its Charter Review Committee, and he currently sits on a South Florida Water Management District Lake Okeechobee subcommittee. He's a member of the local Real Estate Investment Society and BUPAC, a local business-oriented political action committee. He'll be 27 in August, was married to his wife Yvonne in 2005 and has a newborn daughter.

Caldwell points out that whomever wins the seat this fall will be serving when district lines are redrawn after the 2010 Census is complete. If the county is to have a Senate district designed to represent its own voice, Caldwell says, that's when it must happen.

"Right now, we have three state senators," he said. "We have Mike Bennett, Dave Aronberg and Burt Saunders."

Bennett's District 21 seat includes a chunk of northern Lee. He lives in Bradenton. Saunders' District 37 seat includes coastal Collier and coastal and central Lee County. He's a Naples resident.

Aronberg is the only senator District 27 has ever had. The district was gerrymandered into existence after the 2000 Census, stretching virtually from the state's Gulf Coast to the Atlantic coast and including south Lee communities Bonita Springs, Estero and San Carlos Park. Drawn to ensure party balance, it includes a heavy Republican majority on this coast and a big Democratic advantage in Palm Beach County. Overall,

the two parties split the electorate with just under 40 percent each, with the rest being independents or minor party voters.

Caldwell lives in Lehigh Acres. Aronberg lives in Greenacres, a few miles from the Atlantic.

“Dave Aronberg is from the east coast, and despite all the promises he may make in 2011 when they draw the lines, we’re going to continue to be the hind end,” Caldwell said. “If we want a senator from this county, change is going to have to happen in this election.”

Aronberg is the only Democrat representing any part of Lee County in any partisan position. He says the challenge is retaliation against the Democratic Party — and him — by the Republican Party.

When the Republican Party of Florida began running attack ads against Aronberg a few weeks ago, he held a press conference — flanked by prominent local Republicans — blaming an unwritten rule being violated in an east coast Senate race.

The understanding has always been that the Senate president-elect is not challenged for re-election. This year, that is Sen. Jeff Atwater of North Palm Beach. He’s being challenged by Democrat Skip Campbell, who served in a Broward County-based district before term limits put him out in 2006.

“I was told this would happen,” Aronberg said. “It’s an east coast vendetta invading Southwest Florida. I was told they were going to put \$1 million behind a challenger against me. That’s why my opponent was recruited and that’s why the attack ads (are) against me.”

Caldwell said he’s seen the ads. He said he checks the facts behind them, but that’s all he knows about them.

“I’m not (state party chairman) Jim Greer,” he said. “I’m not ignorant of what’s going on. It’s no secret the Republican Party of Florida is gunning for this seat.”

Caldwell joins a race that also includes Boynton Beach Republican Ed Heeney.

A Green Party candidate also entered the race on Tuesday — Aniana Robas of Riverview, south of Tampa.

Heeney and Caldwell would meet in the Republican primary on Aug. 26. Aronberg and Robas would await the winner Nov. 4. But more candidates could still join the race, since the deadline to qualify is Friday.



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## Three Take Aim At Sen. Aronberg

Ron Bukley -- 7/4/2008

In what has normally been a safe seat, State Sen. Dave Aronberg (D-District 27) finds himself battling three challengers in his re-election bid.

Those challengers include two Republicans who will face off during the Aug. 26 primary election — Ed Heeney of Boynton Beach and Matt Caldwell of Lehigh Acres in Lee County — and Aniana Robas representing the Green Party.

Florida State Senate District 27 runs across the state from West Palm Beach to Fort Myers, taking in much of the western communities.

Aronberg, a Democrat, has represented the district since 2002.

It's Heeney's second run for political office. He ran against State Rep. Susan Bucher (D-District 88) in 2004, pushing a strident anti-gay agenda that won him a cameo appearance on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. He took 30 percent of the vote in that race.

Heeney is running on a similar agenda this time, calling himself the "last straight white man" and warning against the "gay mafia." Heeney, 54, is a paralegal and owner of a plant nursery in Lantana. He describes himself as "land poor" and a "pauper." He said he is concerned about mortgage rates and people being driven out of their homes. "This is not a recession; it is a full-blown depression," he said. "Being a pauper, I'm able to survive."

Caldwell, whose number is not listed, did not answer calls placed to a phone number supplied by the Palm Beach County Republican Party. Local party officials said they did not know Caldwell. However, media on Florida's west coast report that he is 27 years old, works for a real estate appraisal firm and has been active in Lee County government.

Aronberg said that Democratic Party officials feel that Caldwell was recruited by the Republican Party to run in retaliation to Democrat Walter "Skip" Campbell running against Republican State Sen. Jeff Atwater in District 25.

Although Caldwell has not yet reported campaign donations to the state, Aronberg said the Republican Party has spent over \$100,000 on attack fliers and a negative television ad in Lee County.

"The Republican Party spent \$100,000 attacking me. There's nothing positive, just misleading, negative ads," Aronberg said.

Democratic Party officials also believe that Robas was also put up as a candidate to dilute the vote, Aronberg said.

"She was an independent and switched," he said. "She lives in Tampa and describes her political views as moderate. Her intention is not to win, but to take away Democratic votes. The head of the Green Party has never heard of her. I wish we could have a fair election instead of these shenanigans."

Aronberg said his primary focus in his six years as senator has been consumer protection, public safety and Everglades restoration. His focus on consumer protection stemmed from his work as

assistant attorney general in economic crimes, focusing strongly on fighting identity theft. Aronberg has sponsored a bill that imposes privacy requirements on companies that control personal information, and as chair of the Joint Committee on Everglades Oversight, Aronberg said he led the fight for Everglades restoration.

Other issues Aronberg is working on include restaurant safety and reducing food-borne contaminants by increasing the number of health inspectors. He serves on the Medicare Task Force that he said has saved millions of dollars by reducing fraudulent claims. Aronberg plans to continue to work on the issues of homeowners' insurance and tax reform.

"I think we're going to face a crisis when it comes to rising insurance rates and a state tax structure that can't support the state's basic needs," he said. "We will need bold moves by government to adopt a catastrophic insurance plan, otherwise it will never make a sharp decline."

Education remains a big issue, Aronberg said. "We are still at the bottom percentile on funding for our greatest resource, our children. We actually cut education funding this year," he said.

Another issue Aronberg has been working on is broadening legislation to restrict sex offenders from coming within 300 feet of parks, schools or libraries.

"The current focus is only on where they get their mail, but it doesn't apply to where they hang out during the day," he said.

## Candidates Have The Floor At Palms West Chamber Luncheon

Carol Porter -- 7/18/2008

Candidates hoping to represent the western communities at the state and federal levels were featured guests at the Palms West Chamber of Commerce's "Meet the Candidates Forum" luncheon on Monday.

Candidates included Democrat Paul Renneisen and Republican Col. Allen West, both vying for Congressional Seat 22, currently held by Congressman Ron Klein; Republicans Gayle Harrell, Tom Rooney and Hal Valeche, vying for Congressional Seat 16, held by Congressman Tim Mahoney; District 27 State Sen. Dave Aronberg and his Republican opponent Matt Caldwell; District 83 incumbent State Rep. Carl Domino and his Democrat opponents Rick Ford and Bryan Miller; and District 85 hopefuls Democrat Joe Abruzzo and Republican Howard Coates hoping to replace the retiring State Rep. Shelley Vana. Mahoney and Klein were in Washington, D.C. and could not attend the forum.

Harrell, who currently represents Martin County's District 81 as state representative, said while door-to-door campaigning recently in Wellington, residents told her they are very upset with Congress. Harrell asserted that District 16 incumbent Mahoney is voting for increased taxes and more regulation.

"That is not the way we will spur the economy and move things forward," she said. "I have a long record in the Florida House of Representatives of promoting tax decreases. I promoted \$28 billion of tax decreases. I've been active in property tax relief, which helps you as businessmen and businesswomen, and also as homeowners."

Harrell said her preferred energy strategy includes offshore drilling as well as alternative energy sources.

Rooney said his experience in the U.S. Army and as a prosecutor would be useful in Congress. "I'm the only non-politician in this race," Rooney said. "We need to bring real leadership to Washington. Washington is broken. It needs real out-of-the-box thinking on how to fix it. I want to go to Washington to not only bring new ideas and concepts to what we have been going over for the last 20 to 30 years, but also to bring common-sense viewpoints on things like immigration. If you are an illegal immigrant and you commit a crime, you should serve your time and be deported."

Rooney said he supports offshore drilling because it would offer options other than the country's continued reliance on foreign oil. He concurred with Harrell that a vote for Mahoney is a vote for raising taxes.

Valeche, a former Palm Beach Gardens councilman, urged widespread domestic oil drilling in the name of energy independence. "We also need to stop that \$700 billion tax increase for an economy that is faltering on the brink of a recession," he said. "It is foolish economic policy to do that."

District 22 congressional candidates spoke next. Renneisen, an Air Force veteran and anti-war candidate, took Klein to task for supporting the Foreign Intelligence Service Act (FISA) allowing wiretapping during emergencies. "What does that mean to you as a businessman?" Renneisen said. "It's not a corporate cell phone. It could be a personal phone."

Renneisen said he favors a flat tax, which had been supported by Republican presidential hopeful Ron Paul. He said he does not support offshore drilling.

West brought up his service record, most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. He expressed the need for people to understand the U.S. Constitution as the importance of protecting basic liberties through military service. "We need to get people to understand service in this country," West said. "You cannot do it unless you get people to understand service and sacrifice."

West said the U.S. needs to be energy independent and he would turn to private business to provide that. "We must produce and we must consume," West said. "We must export our own energy sources. Then, we can truly have energy independence. We should not talk about raising taxes. We should talk about putting money back in your pocket."

State Senate District 27 incumbent Aronberg and challenger Caldwell were next to speak. Aronberg noted that after six years he has seniority but is still the youngest legislator in the State Senate, where he is slated to be the Democratic Leader Pro Tempore.

Aronberg said he has a passion to serve in the State Legislature and hopes to continue. Meeting people in his sprawling cross-state district is just a small part of what he does, he said.

"I have been able to work across party lines in a hyper-partisan environment," he said. "I think I have developed a reputation as a bridge builder and being able to bring home the dollars to this district. It doesn't matter what party the person I am working for is. I work to get things done."

Aronberg said he voted against a bill allowing citizens to leave guns in their automobiles outside their place of employment — something that did not make him popular with some of the other legislators. The National Rifle Association had enough clout to push the bill through, but he still does not think it was a good bill because of private property and safety issues.

"I was proud to stand up against the NRA even though I knew I was going to take a hit politically," Aronberg said. "A business owner should be able to determine what goes on in his or her property. Government should not be involved in that decision."

Caldwell, a Fort Myers resident, said he is also committed to working with representatives of both sides but believes in a conservative philosophy. As a native Floridian who recently welcomed a daughter, Caldwell said he wants to work for her and for the generations after her. "She will be the eighth generation to live and play and work in this great state," Caldwell said.

Caldwell said he would have voted for the guns-to-work bill because he believes it is the right of citizens to bear arms. "I believe in a conservative philosophy," Caldwell said. "I understand there are contentious issues out there. I would have voted for the bill. If a person can't bear arms, I don't care if it's a gun or a salad fork. It's your right as a citizen. If they can't have that, you basically have disarmed them from sunup to sundown, to and from work."

Moving to State House District 83, a northern Palm Beach County district including much of The Acreage, incumbent Domino said he is a businessman, and like the chamber members gathered in the audience, he has many pleasant dealings as a business owner, along with the down side of having to fire people and cut payrolls in difficult times. "That's why we need to have business people in the legislature," Domino said.

Domino said he was very supportive of the Scripps Research Institute initiative and he looks

forward to that agency opening its new building in the near future. Domino said that when he ran for office the first time, Florida had an economy that tended toward things that were cyclical, like agriculture and tourism. "We need the fourth leg of the stool," Domino said, "and that means high-paying jobs."

Domino added that he fought hard for the recently passed property tax reform including homestead portability so people are not locked in their homes.

Ford, who nearly unseated Domino in 2006, said he believes the residents of Palm Beach County and Florida would have been better served if the legislature did not spend as much time talking about what he considers inconsequential issues, such as appendages dangling from the rear of trucks and saggy pants.

While Domino had praised improvements in education in Palm Beach County, Ford said Florida's education system overall is still in need of fixing. "The graduation rate is 50th in the nation," Ford said. "We are last in the nation in per-capita spending for our children. The legislature balanced the budget by taking money away from education. My goal is to be a legislator who listens to his constituents and who comes and meets with them. We run a grassroots campaign. We don't flood you with mailers that you throw in the trash. We ask you to come and meet with us and find out what your concerns are."

Miller, the other Democrat vying for Seat 83, commended Aronberg for voting against the guns-to-work bill. "This is one of the most anti-business laws," Miller said. "I want to commend the Florida Chamber of Commerce and the retail federation for opposing this. It is not only a threat to public safety, it is an outrageous infringement on private property rights."

Next up were Abruzzo and Coates, both seeking to represent the Wellington-based State House District 85.

Abruzzo spoke about his service to the community working as a port security specialist with the U.S. Coast Guard.

"I'm a representative who understands security," Abruzzo said. "I plan to work as hard as I can to make sure that Florida is safe. I am running for office because I live in this state, and it has given me so many opportunities to make a difference. I understand that you want a representative who will look to the future and bring change to Tallahassee."

Coates said he decided to run because people asked him to. "I spoke with a lot of people in Palm Beach County and especially in Wellington and they kept telling me to run because they felt I could make a difference," said Coates, who recently lost a bid for Wellington Village Council. "We are in a perfect storm for our business community. We are in a real estate collapse. There is the mortgage meltdown. The gas prices are threatening to push us not only into a recession but into a long-term depression. You will have to have people get past the partisanship and roll up their sleeves and do the right thing."

Coates said he opposes offshore oil drilling because the federal government has not investigated other options. "We have to push for renewable energy resources," Coates said. "We cannot rely on the federal government to do that. We have to take measures to incentivize solar and wind, and even do research on using the Gulf Stream."

Next month's Palms West Chamber of Commerce luncheon is scheduled to feature candidates for

property appraiser, supervisor of elections, sheriff and judgeships. It is set for Monday, Aug. 11 at 11:45 a.m. at the Wellington Community Center. For more information, call (561) 790-6200.

## District 27 Race Shaping Up As East-West Fight

Ron Bukley -- 7/18/2008

Lee County Republican Matt Caldwell is challenging Democratic incumbent State Sen. Dave Aronberg of Greenacres in an attempt to get more representation for the west side of the saddlebag-shaped District 27.

Also appearing on the ballot will be Green Party candidate Aniana Robas, who lives way outside the district in the Tampa area. Boynton Beach Republican Ed Heeney, who was to face Caldwell in the August primary election, told the Town-Crier Thursday he had dropped out of the race and ceased campaigning. It remains unclear if Heeney's name will be on the Aug. 26 primary ballot. A Florida Division of Elections representative said Thursday they had not received a letter from Heeney reflecting his intention not to run.

District 27 runs across the state from West Palm Beach to Fort Myers, taking in much of the western communities. Caldwell, a member of the Lee County Republican Executive Committee, noted that if elected, he would be the only Lee County resident in the state senate.

"We have three State Senate seats that come into Lee County, but none of those state senators actually reside in Lee County," Caldwell told the Town-Crier. "That's something I would like to fix with the next [redistricting] opportunity in 2011. I'm sure the citizens of Palm Beach County would like to have their own representative who is not split between two different regions."

Issues Caldwell said he wants to address are "things that hit people in the wallet," including property taxes and insurance.

"Certainly, we're paying through the nose right now for energy; that's something I want to address," Caldwell said. "I want to make sure that District 27 has some representation that reflects my values. When I look at our current senator, he's a nice guy, but we disagree on what role government should play in people's lives. I would like to offer people a different choice."

During Monday's "meet the candidates" forum presented by the Palms West Chamber of Commerce, one of the differences that came out between Caldwell and Aronberg concerned the so-called guns-to-work law that passed during the last legislative session. It allows individuals to have guns in their vehicles while they are at work.

"We have a fundamental disagreement on the issue," Aronberg told the Town-Crier on Thursday.

Aronberg voted in the minority against the guns-to-work law, saying it posed serious safety issues. Caldwell said he favored the law as part of a constitutional right to bear arms.

Aronberg takes issue with Caldwell's assertion that Lee County would be better served by a local representative. "I don't want geography to divide the people of this district," Aronberg said. "Lee County deserves a strong representative, which is why I'm running. I don't think it's productive to make it a divisive battle of Lee County vs. Palm Beach County."

Caldwell, 27, said he knows winning in District 27 this year will be an uphill battle against an incumbent, but not an unrealistic one. Although a relatively young newcomer in the political arena, he points out that Aronberg was just 31 when he was first elected.

"I wouldn't call four years that big a difference," Caldwell said. "On a bigger scale, I wouldn't run

if it was a joke of a race. There's a significant chance the way the district is drawn. It's a 50-50 district. If you just take the turnout for each party and assume that they vote for you, the difference is just a couple of hundred votes. You've got to work both sides of the district, whether you are a Republican or a Democrat, to convince a significant percentage of the other party to support you."

Caldwell said a change in voter mentality the last two elections could be in his favor. "There is a heavy anti-incumbent move," he said. "Regardless of what party they're from, people are really keen on giving a shot to the new guy. That's been very prevalent here in Lee County, with a lot of turnover of long-standing incumbents."

Caldwell added that although he disagrees with the way the district is drawn, he will show no favoritism if elected. "If elected, I will represent all of District 27," Caldwell said. "I'm displeased that in the last go-around with redistricting, eastern Lee County and western Palm Beach County were tied together at the hip. We all are Floridians and share some common interesting goals, but clearly, these are two different regions economically and socially... But it's something that I've accepted, and I'm happy to serve the whole district, particularly during that first term."

Caldwell said he would be the more effective legislator when redistricting comes up. "Dave, for one thing, is probably going to run for attorney general in 2010," Caldwell said. "In either event, he's term-limited, and he's also in the minority party, so when it comes time for redistricting, I would be surprised if he has much say in what happens at all."

If elected this year, Caldwell said he would be a strong incumbent, actively engaged in the 2011 redistricting process.

However, Aronberg said being a lame duck at redistricting time would actually be an advantage. "You don't want people drawing districts who have a vested interest in protecting their own political careers," he said. "I think it's better to have politicians who are not going to manipulate the redistricting process to their own advantage. I don't think reapportionment should be handled by the legislature at all."

Aronberg also denied that he is currently thinking ahead to an attorney general run in 2010. "As far as my political career, I am solely focused on my re-election to the state senate," Aronberg said. "I appreciate Matt's belief that I could go higher, but I'm not so presumptuous."

## **Town-Crier Primary Endorsements, Part 1**

Town-Crier Staff Opinion -- 8/8/2008

Polls will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 26 for the primary election. This week and next, the *Town-Crier* offers our opinions on some of the items voters will find on the ballot:

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES DISTRICT 16, REPUBLICAN PRIMARY** — There are three candidates vying to challenge Democratic Congressman Tim Mahoney: **Gayle Harrell, Tom Rooney** and **Hal Valeche**. If Republicans want to choose the best candidate to face Mahoney, they should choose Harrell, who currently serves in the State House of Representatives in Martin County's District 81. While District 16 includes part of Palm Beach County, it is largely a Treasure Coast district. Harrell already has a strong base in Martin County. She is also the only candidate with legislative experience. Valeche served on the Palm Beach Gardens City Council, and Rooney is an Army veteran and former criminal prosecutor; both would have a considerably higher learning curve in Congress than Harrell. **The *Town-Crier* endorses Gayle Harrell in the Congressional District 16 Republican Primary.**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES DISTRICT 22, DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY** — In this race, **Paul Renneisen** is challenging incumbent **Ron Klein**, a former state senator who was elected to Congress in 2006. Democratic voters should stick with Klein, who has emerged as a rising star in the Democratic Party nationwide since unseating former GOP powerbroker Clay Shaw two years ago. Klein is leading the effort for national disaster insurance legislation, which is an important issue for Floridians. Renneisen's main issue in his campaign is the Iraq war, but he hasn't addressed enough issues of particular concern to Floridians. **The *Town-Crier* endorses Ron Klein in the Congressional District 22 Democratic Primary.**

**STATE SENATE DISTRICT 27, REPUBLICAN PRIMARY** — **Matt Caldwell** of Lee County is the only real candidate remaining in the GOP primary for State Senate in District 27. Though one-time challenger **Ed Heeney**, a right-wing fringe candidate from Boynton Beach, has dropped out of the race, his name will appear on the ballot. Republicans should reject Heeney's negative vitriol in favor of Caldwell, a more mainstream GOP candidate. The winner will face incumbent State Sen. Dave Aronberg in the fall. **The *Town-Crier* endorses Matt Caldwell in the State Senate District 27 Republican Primary.**

**STATE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES DISTRICT 83, DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY** — Democrats **Rick Ford** and **Bryan Miller**, both attorneys, are qualified candidates to represent the district, which includes the northern half of The Acreage. It's a tough decision, but our inclination is to support Ford, who nearly unseated powerful incumbent Carl Domino two years ago. While both Ford and Miller would be formidable candidates and good legislators, Ford has earned the right to finish what he started in an underfunded, darkhorse campaign in 2006. **The *Town-Crier* endorses Rick Ford in the State House District 83 Democratic Primary.**

**PALM BEACH COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD, SEAT I** — Incumbent **Dr. Monroe Benaim** faces challengers **Kelly Sturmthal** and **Jonathan Williams** in a district that includes the northern half of The Acreage. While Williams, an Acreage resident, has some good ideas, Dr. Benaim has been a good friend of The Acreage community. In a year when revenues are falling and the state is threatening to completely upend the school taxing structure, it is not the time to be breaking in new school board members. **The *Town-Crier* endorses the re-election of Dr. Monroe Benaim to School Board Seat 1.**

**PORT OF PALM BEACH, GROUP 2** — In this universal primary contest, challenger **Charles Bantel** faces incumbent **George Mastics**. The port district includes Royal Palm Beach, The Acreage and Loxahatchee Groves. Both candidates are Democrats, but since no other candidates are running this year, all voters will get a chance to cast ballots in this race. After interviewing both candidates, the *Town-Crier* believes that voters should stick with longtime incumbent Mastics. Bantel offers criticisms of his opponent but provides few new ideas. **The *Town-Crier* endorses the re-election of George Mastics to the Port of Palm Beach Group 2 Seat.**

Whether you agree with our opinions or not, please make a point to vote on Aug. 26 and help keep our democracy strong!

## Caldwell Wants District Lines Drawn Fairly

Don Brown -- 10/17/2008

Matt Caldwell will be the first person to agree that he has no easy task in his attempt to unseat State Sen. Dave Aronberg from the District 27 seat he has held since 2002. But the young Lehigh Acres resident is giving an all-out effort.

Caldwell, 27, has lived in Lee County all his life and said one of his first tasks, if elected, will be to try to redraw the boundaries of the sprawling district that stretches from near the Atlantic Ocean in Palm Beach County all the way west to the Gulf of Mexico. The district also includes the central Palm Beach County communities of Wellington, Loxahatchee and Greenacres.

Caldwell, a real estate appraiser, is married and the father of a young child. He said he wants to be in office when the next U.S. Census is taken in 2010. That would trigger redistricting throughout the state. "We need to fix the gerrymandering of districts," he said.

Caldwell said he would go a step further by redistricting so that each of the state's 12 counties with a population of more than 500,000 has its own senate district. "Lee is the only large county that doesn't have a resident state senator," he said. "The situation in Lee County could just as easily happen in Palm Beach County."

While the needs of Gulf Coast residents are important, Caldwell said he would continue to represent Palm Beach County voters in Tallahassee. "I'll make a concerted effort to be here at least once a week and listen to the people's concerns," he said.

Caldwell said he considers his personal principles among his top qualifications for office. "People like to talk about policy positions," he said. "People want to go right into issues such as solving healthcare or the current financial crisis. I like to focus on people's principles and where they come from politically and philosophically. In decisions you make on a bill up or down, little intricacies might change your decision, but you need to know where a person is philosophically."

His philosophical outlook is that "rights to life, self-defense, freedom of religion and speech are inviolate." Caldwell said he would not vote for any bill that abrogates any of those four principals, no matter how massive or how important something else that might be in it.

"I think those things cannot be broached," Caldwell said. "That's where I come from. That's the way I look at the world, and it's that window through which I will view any legislation that comes before me."

Caldwell carries a handout listing only four points, titled "Matt's Commitment to You" — cut taxes and reduce government waste, remove barriers to lower insurance premiums, manage growth through market solutions and foster economic opportunities, and deport illegal aliens convicted of felonies.

If those bullet points sound like they were lifted from a Republican Party handbook, that is not a coincidence. The state Republican Party accounts for a large portion of the money used to push Caldwell's campaign. Reports are persistent that both Republican and Democratic party bosses cut a deal to stay out of the campaigns of Aronberg and fellow Palm Beach County State Sen. Jeff Atwater, who represents District 25. However, Democrat Skip Campbell filed to run against Atwater but later withdrew his candidacy. Republican leaders reportedly tapped Caldwell to run against Aronberg in retribution.

Caldwell denies the reports and said he considered running for office as early as two years ago, but figured he would have difficulty raising the money required to wage the campaign. According to his own estimate, he has raised nearly \$100,000.

"The state [Republican] party wants a majority of the seats," he said. "There are several races where they are on the offense. That's the nature of the party. It feels District 27 is vulnerable."

Caldwell said he would work hard to stabilize the state's economy by increasing industry. "Our economy rests on a three-legged stool of agriculture, tourism and development," he warned.

Expanding the state economy would include "energy production such as ecologically safe oil drilling that could create jobs. Oil refining is another potential avenue to create revenue and jobs."

Caldwell pointed out that no new oil refinery has been built in the U.S. in 30 years. "There are major ports in Florida that could support an industrial sector," he said, adding that he supports nuclear energy, noting that new technology has made the industry safer. "Every day that goes by, we get more technologically advanced."

Redistricting, the state budget and Everglades restoration, including the state buyout of U.S. Sugar, are among Caldwell's top priorities. "If I had a magic wand and was the state U.S. Sugar czar, I would open the lands for a stormwater treatment area and flow way for that region," he said.

Caldwell added that the federal government has ignored road improvements on the Tamiami Trail, which forms the northern border of Everglades National Park, for a long time. "U.S. Highway 41 needs to be raised so that it does not act as a dam to the flow of water," he said.

Caldwell said he is looking forward to making use of his passion for managing taxes and budgeting. He is proud of his work on a Lee County budget committee that he claims found \$1.5 billion county commissioners were "squirreling away." He pointed out that the total Lee County budget is \$3.5 billion. "There's all kinds of craziness there," he said.

Caldwell could not point to anything specific he would do to help the western communities of Palm Beach County. "I don't know everything that is needed here, but I am familiar with issues such as the inland port [proposed for the Glades] and the U.S. Sugar buyout," he said. "I'll get over here and hear what the people tell me."

Caldwell suggested a sense of confidence might be his weakness "I tend to be self-assured, if that's a weakness," he said. "Growing up as the oldest of grandkids, I was doted on an awful lot. But I've learned as an adult in business not to charge too far ahead or step over other employees."

Aronberg, on the other hand, he faulted for relishing his high profile. "He enjoys the popularity of the office more than accomplishing things," he said.

While acknowledging his opponent as "a nice guy and very genial," Caldwell counted his own affability as his strength. "I'll always try to get back to people who try to get in touch with me," he said.

## Candidates for Florida Senate District 27 rally crowds in Estero

By ELIZABETH WRIGHT

Originally published 06:51 p.m., October 23, 2008

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Two opponents in a contested state senate race have this in common: both had the chance to warm up the crowds at recent rallies in Estero, opening for vice presidential candidates.

Of course, they were at different rallies, rooting for different candidates and delivering different messages.

Matt Caldwell, candidate for Florida Senate District 27, explained his view of conservatism before Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin took the microphone at Germain Arena earlier this month.

Two days later, Dave Aronberg, the incumbent state senator, went on stage at Alico Arena ahead of Joe Biden's appearance, to talk up Democratic sway in Lee County.

That's just the start of a list of the differences between the two men.

Aronberg, 37, a lawyer from Greenacres, has held his office for six years, while Caldwell, 27, a real estate appraiser from Lehigh Acres, has never run for elected office before.

### **CANDIDATES**

Caldwell took a break from righting campaign signs in Bonita Springs this week to talk about his reasons for challenging Aronberg.

While he said he has been criticized for his age and lack of experience, "the question is whether they want to change gears," he said. "I think it comes down to issues and outlook."

The outlook he offers is that of a conservative who believes government should steer clear of too much regulation, and if elected, he said he would never become a "career politician."

He favors gun rights, and he criticized Aronberg for not supporting a proposal that would allow employees to bring their weapons to work.

In turn, Aronberg criticized Caldwell for not supporting the private property rights of employers in being able to control whether weapons can be brought on site.

Aronberg questioned whether Caldwell would do enough to support reforms and additional investment in Florida's education system.

While he agreed with Caldwell that their views differ when it comes to the role of government — "I believe in empowering people," Aronberg said — his view is that specific, Florida issues will decide this election, not political philosophies.

At the top of Aronberg's list: The fate of a stretch of Interstate 75.

"Voters have responded to my opposition to the sell-off of Alligator Alley," Aronberg said.

Caldwell said he opposes that plan, too, but Aronberg claims Caldwell hasn't been consistent in his criticism of a proposal that could lease a portion of I-75 to a private company for the next 50 years.

"This is one of the defining issues in this race," Aronberg said. "You can't waver. It's of fundamental importance to Southwest Florida. I have been leading the fight against this bad deal."

According to Caldwell, though, another important local fight is delivering more representation in Tallahassee to people from Southwest Florida.

That's what he can offer that Aronberg can't, Caldwell said — the experience of dealing with traffic on State Road 82 regularly, for instance.

Aronberg dismissed the argument that he can't do a good job for Lee County simply because he lives at the other end of the sprawling senate district.

Caldwell could have had a point, he said, but only if he had proved himself to be an unconcerned, cross-state senator.

"If you look at my record, I have always made Lee County a priority," Aronberg said. "It's not enough to say you live there."

## **ECONOMY**

One issue both candidates mentioned was frustration among voters with the current economic hard times.

"The number one concern is the economy," Caldwell said. "It's hard to get back in business. It's hard to get back to work."

He said he could explain — and assign blame — for the current economic problems by pointing at the federal government on down.

The fix, he said, is less regulation.

“We need to make it less expensive for people to go into business,” he said. “The solution is to get out of people’s way.”

He’d also encourage taking a look at oil drilling in the Gulf as a way to create jobs and lower gas prices, and he said he’d also scrutinize property taxes.

“I think it’s ridiculous that we still haven’t got rid of the recapture rule,” he said.

Aronberg said he would focus on ending “loopholes” in the state’s sales tax laws, which would shift some of the tax burden off property owners.

He pointed to his work as a consumer advocate, and he said he’d continue tackling the costs of homeowners insurance in the state.

“We need to make Florid affordable again,” he said.

Who wins will be up to the nearly 299,000 registered voters in the 27th senate district, an oddly-drawn district that drapes across portions of five counties.

Of the total number of registered voters in the district, about 134,000 are in Lee County, according to state election statistics. About 65,000 of those are registered Republicans and nearly 39,000 are Democrats.

A smaller group of district voters live in slices of Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties, and the rest live in Palm Beach County, Aronberg’s home territory.

There, the split between the parties is a mirror image of Lee County: 80,000 registered Democrats and about 41,000 registered Republicans.

Caldwell said he expects to win the Lee County portion of the district, and he expects the race overall will be close.

Aronberg offered no predictions.

“I always run like I’m 10 points behind,” he said. “I’m cautiously optimistic.”



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