

Iowa Politics Roundup: Vander Plaats Attacks Branstad in First Debate

Written by Lynn Campbell
Friday, 09 April 2010 14:02

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Sioux City businessman Bob Vander Plaats came out swinging in this year's first Republican gubernatorial debate, attacking opponent and former Governor Terry Branstad on everything from raising taxes to bringing gambling to the state to appointing two of the Supreme Court justices who wrote the decision legalizing same-sex marriage in Iowa.

"Leadership is also about being honest," Vander Plaats said Wednesday. "Governor Branstad, some of the results are: raising taxes not once but twice; increasing fees 30 times; bringing in gambling, parimutuel betting, the state lottery; growing the size of government two and a half times. Those are also results that we need to be honest with the people of Iowa about."

Branstad defended his 16-year record as governor, saying that he reduced the unemployment rate from 8.5 to 2.5 percent and cut taxes by \$124 million, and that when he left office in 1998, the state had a \$900-million surplus. "Iowans want results, not rhetoric," he said. "I was the governor that put in place a fiscal plan that got us a balanced budget based on generally accepted accounting principles and gave us a \$900-million surplus when I left office. I want to do that again."

On gambling, all candidates spoke out against Democratic Governor Chet Culver's call for the Iowa Racing & Gaming Commission to approve four new casino licenses. Representative Rod Roberts (R-Carroll) said this is the wrong way to stimulate the economy, and the state should be looking to the private sector instead. Branstad said the state can't gamble its way to prosperity by adding four more casinos.

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"It's wrongheaded; it doesn't make sense," Branstad said. "I believe we've got enough gambling in Iowa and we should not be expanding it. I believe that Iowans are the ones that are hurt when we get too much gambling in our state. Iowans do support the gambling we have, but they don't want to see an expansion."

Vander Plaats continued his attacks on Branstad after the debate.

"I have to admit I was shocked that the man who signed the legislation that brought gambling to our state and oversaw the opening of 15 casinos would suddenly take exception with Chet Culver for proposing to do one-fourth of what he did," Vander Plaats said in a news release. "He can call it an attack when someone raises the issue of his role in bringing gambling to our state, but the facts are the facts. His newfound belief that Iowa has enough gambling just doesn't square with his record."

Branstad and Roberts on Wednesday joined in criticizing Vander Plaats' plan to issue an executive order to put a stay on same-sex marriages, saying it would be unconstitutional and would discredit the governor.

"I wish it was as simple as what Bob Vander Plaats says," Branstad said. "No state has restored one-man-one-woman marriage by an executive order. That's going to get you in court, and you're probably going to be held in contempt of court or at least overruled by the court. That doesn't make sense. We don't want to discredit the governor. We want to get results."

Branstad, who as governor signed the Defense of Marriage Act, said Iowa should do what 31 other states have done, which is by a vote of the people to pass a constitutional amendment restricting marriage to the union of one man and one woman.

"I don't agree with Bob's decision to use the executive order," Roberts said. "I don't believe it's constitutional. I do think it will create conflict. I think the governor should work hand-in-hand with the legislative branch of government to deal with the judicial branch in terms of where we can find areas we could perhaps limit the appellate authority of the court."

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But Vander Plaats stood firm that he'd issue that executive order, saying the governor is the chief magistrate of Iowa. "The constitution backs us up," he said. "That's why David Barton, a constitutional historian, says the executive order is the right way to go. ... As a leader, you need to lead. And part of that leadership is defending that constitution."

Governor Signs Bill to Respond to Campaign-Finance Decision

Iowa on Thursday became one of the first states to respond to the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United V. FEC*, which found that corporate spending in elections cannot be limited under the First Amendment.

Senator Jeff Danielson (D-Cedar Falls) said the bill signed by Culver gives citizens a "fighting chance" in knowing who is communicating with them.

Danielson, who floor-managed the bill in the Iowa Senate, said the new law holds corporations to the same rules as citizens when it comes to political expenditures.

"We don't ask them to do anything different than what we as candidates do or what current political-action committees do or some of our other independent-expenditure laws that have been on the books," Danielson said. "We simply took Iowa's best practices and applied it to this new situation."

The law requires corporations to obtain an affirmative board vote before ads can run for or against a candidate or issue. The ad must also include who paid for it, the name and address of the corporation, and the name of the chief executive officer. Expenditures over \$750 must be filed with the Iowa Ethics & Campaign Disclosure Board within 48 hours of when the cost is incurred, and violations are serious misdemeanors.

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Waterloo Lawmaker Charged with Shortchanging School, Ends Re-Election Bid

State Representative Kerry Burt (D-Waterloo) ended his campaign for re-election Wednesday after being charged with providing a false address to save thousands of dollars on his child's tuition at the Malcolm Price Laboratory School in Cedar Falls. This comes after Burt also pleaded guilty last fall to drunken driving.

"In the last year, allegations have been made against my family and others concerning Price Lab School," Burt said in a statement. "The charges filed by the attorney general today will give me an opportunity to set the record straight, and I look forward to my day in court. I believe I am innocent and strongly believe my name will be vindicated once all of the relevant facts come to light."

Burt went on to say: "However, given the timing of these matters, it's important that I focus my full attention on my family. Although I will serve out the remaining months of my term as state representative, I will not seek re-election to the Iowa House and I am ending my campaign effective today."

Burt was scheduled to face Democrat Anesa Kajtazovic of Waterloo in the June 8 primary election. Republicans John Roof of Waterloo and Lyn Tackett of Waterloo are also vying for the House District 21 seat.

Burt is one of nine people named in criminal complaints and affidavits filed Wednesday by the attorney general's office in Black Hawk County District Court in Waterloo, alleging that the parents listed false addresses on school records to indicate their children lived in the Price Lab School zone when they did not.

Iowa Average in Prioritizing Education Funding, Federal Officials Say

Iowa scores average in the eyes of the federal government for making education funding a priority. Five federal reviewers gave Iowa a combined score of 7.6 out of 10 in this area of its Race to the Top application, according to data posted online.

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"The state asserts its funding formula is 'one of the most equitable in the nation,' and it supports its claim by citing failed attempts by third-parties to successfully challenge the formula's equitability," one reviewer wrote. "While the formula does establish ... a per-pupil funding amount that is consistent to all schools and provides additional funding that favors low-income schools, the presence of court challenges may reflect a dissatisfaction among certain stakeholders with the formula."

The reviewer went on to say that Iowa education officials failed to describe how the state's formula has led to equitable funding between high-need local-education agencies and other agencies, and between high-poverty schools and other schools. "The state's inability to describe the impact of its funding formula undermines its assertion that its formula is 'one of the most equitable in the nation,'" the reviewer wrote.

Culver touted last week that the state will invest nearly \$3.4 billion in its education system, including an additional \$333 million in education funding. Democrats said this demonstrates the state's emphasis on education. But Republicans said the state is underfunding K-12 education by \$167 million next school year, and that there will probably be 2,500 pink slips for teachers and an increase in property taxes.

Overall, Iowa ranked 24th out of 41 states in its first-round application to Race to the Top -- the \$4.35-billion federal competitive-grant program -- with a score of 346 of a possible 500, according to data posted online by the U.S. Department of Education.

As Republican lawmakers predicted, the state scored poorly on charter schools. Iowa received only 13.8 out of 40 in ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools. "The law is silent regarding the encouragement of charter schools that serve student populations that are similar to local district student populations," a reviewer wrote.

Education Director Taking Early Retirement

Judy Jeffrey, the 68-year-old director of the Iowa Department of Education, plans to retire next month, and Culver has named Kevin Fangman -- the current division administrator for

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prekindergarten through 12th-grade education -- as acting director. A search will begin for Jeffrey's replacement.

Jeffrey is taking early retirement under incentives approved earlier this year aimed at saving the state \$60 million. She began her career as an elementary-school teacher in the Goldfield Community Schools more than 40 years ago. She joined the Iowa Department of Education in 1996, was named director by Governor Tom Vilsack in 2004, and was asked to stay on when Culver took office in 2007.

"Judy Jeffrey is a national leader in education," Culver said. "She has been instrumental in implementing our state's core curriculum and creating our statewide preschool program. In these difficult economic times, Judy has done an outstanding job leading this vital department and protecting the progress we have made in educating our children. Judy exemplifies what it means to be a public servant, and she will truly be missed."

The deadline to sign up for early retirement is April 15. Participating employees must be 55 years of age, have worked for the state at least 10 years, and agree to never return to state employment. They would receive \$1,000 for each year of employment up to 25 years. They would also receive payments for unused vacation and for health-care premiums over a five-year period beginning this September.

An estimated 6,600 executive-branch employees qualify, including 2,300 who qualify to receive full benefits from IPERS. About 56 legislative employees also qualify.

This weekly summary comes from IowaPolitics.com, an online government and politics news service. Reporter Andrew Duffelmeyer and other correspondents contributed to this report.