

Iowa Politics Roundup: Vander Plaats Launches Group to Target Supreme-Court Justices

Written by Lynn Campbell
Friday, 13 August 2010 13:20

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Standing on the steps in front of the Iowa Judicial Building, former Republican gubernatorial candidate Bob Vander Plaats of Sioux City on Wednesday announced the launch of Iowa for Freedom, a campaign aimed at unseating three Iowa Supreme Court justices who were part of the unanimous *Varnum V. Brien* decision that legalized same-sex marriage in Iowa.

On "April 3, 2009, they clearly legislated from the bench by saying Iowa will be a same-sex-marriage state," said Vander Plaats, He added that the campaign is not only about marriage but about many issues, including gun rights, private-property rights, tax policy, educational choice, immigration laws, and business climate. "If we allow them to make law in this case, every one of our freedoms is up for grabs," he said.

Vander Plaats, who will serve as the campaign's state chair, described the new effort as a grassroots campaign that would be organized either as a political-action committee or as an independent-expenditure committee. The Reverend Brad Sherman of Solid Rock Christian Center spoke about how churches would support the effort, and how 800 church leaders previously signed a petition in support of traditional marriage between a man and woman.

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But Vander Plaats provided few other details about how much money the group would need to raise and which groups are supporting the effort, although he said it has enough cash to provide office and staff, and engage volunteers. The American Family Association helped the campaign launch its Web site (IowaForFreedom.com). Vander Plaats said the National Organization for Marriage is supportive, but "that has not materialized into finances ... as of yet."

He added that "we don't have a set budget in mind," and "we are prepared to be significantly outspent."

About three-dozen people turned out to hear Vander Plaats' announcement on a sizzling day. The group included reporters, a state trooper, and opponents as well as supporters of gay marriage.

"I believe when we do this in Iowa, it will send a ripple effect across the country, and it will give hope to the people in California, and it will give hope to the people in Arizona and across the country that you can hold courts in check," Vander Plaats said. "We are going to take a stand. We're stepping intentionally into the crosshairs of this battle and of this fight because we believe it is worth fighting, and we believe it is worthwhile winning not only to restore traditional marriage, but to restore our separation of powers as well."

One Iowa Executive Director Carolyn Jenison attacked Vander Plaats following the announcement of his new campaign: "Bob Vander Plaats is a failed politician, and he's continuing to use this to play politics with the lives of real Iowans. He's made his sole mission to harm Iowa families, to divide communities and to demean Iowa families. He needed something else to do, honestly. The voters rejected his divisive talk in June, and now it's just one more way to get back out there and try it again. Iowans, I think they're going to reject this conversation in November."

Bipartisan Group Forms to Defend Judicial System

A bipartisan not-for-profit group called Iowans for Fair & Impartial Courts has been formed to tout Iowa's current system for selecting judges and to advocate against politicizing the process. News of the group came one day after formation of the Iowa for Freedom campaign aimed at unseating three Iowa Supreme Court justices who are up for a retention vote in the November 2

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general election.

"We are interested in educating people about the Iowa court system and the selection and retention of judges -- why the system is a good system," said Norbert Kaut, a Des Moines attorney who's director and treasurer of Iowans for Fair & Impartial Courts.

Kaut said the effort was first discussed a year ago and did not come in response to Vander Plaats' formation of Iowa for Freedom. "We had been talking about doing this long before he ever started his campaign," Kaut said. "Other states have judicial elections. There's a strong perception [that] the quality of justice depends on whether you're a contributor. That's something that we've never had to deal with in Iowa."

The new educational campaign is a 501(c)(3) and is mostly a volunteer effort led by former Iowa Democratic Party Chair Scott Brennan and former Republican National Committee member Steve Roberts. Former state Representative Bob Rafferty of Davenport (a former chief of staff to Governor Terry Branstad) is also in the group. Kaut said fundraising will be modest, and activities will be focused on forums or speaking engagements, although TV ads are being considered.

Kaut said Iowans for Fair & Impartial Courts is similar to a group in Minnesota that was formed to keep politics out of the courts. "Iowa has always had a very good reputation of having the right kind of merit system, and fair and impartial courts," he said. "We're not advocating in favor or against any particular judges."

Vander Plaats described the opposition group as "the legal community lashing out": "The way in which a bipartisan group of political elites has organized to keep average Iowans from voicing their opinion is remarkable, but not overly surprising. The fact that these lawyers, who have held high office in both political parties, would so quickly come together to defend the unconstitutional actions of the Supreme Court just serves to illustrate that the power brokers and ruling class within the two political parties have more in common with each other than with average Iowans."

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Independent Candidates File to Run for Office

Former Des Moines school-board member Jonathan Narcisse on Thursday filed the paperwork to get on the November 2 general-election ballot as an "Iowa Party" candidate for governor with running mate Richard Marlar. The deadline to file third-party nomination papers is Friday.

In addition to Democrats and Republicans already on the ballot, Narcisse will join Libertarian and Socialist Workers Party candidates for governor.

There are also Libertarian candidates for Iowa secretary of state and the U.S. Senate. In the First Congressional District, two third-party candidates are running: Libertarian Rob Petsche of Manchester, and independent Jason Faulkner of Maquoketa.

State Fair Attracts Handful of Potential 2012 Presidential Candidates

A number of prominent state and national political figures are attending the 2010 Iowa State Fair, including a number of rumored 2012 Republican presidential hopefuls.

Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia, and former U.S. Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania are among the potential 2012 presidential candidates who will see fairgoers during the 11-day run of the fair, which ends August 22.

Pawlenty was the guest Thursday on two live radio shows at the fair: Jan Michelson in the Morning on WHO news radio and The Big Show with Iowa Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey. Meanwhile, Gingrich had a visit planned for Friday, while Santorum will be at the Republicans' fair booth on Wednesday.

"As an Iowa politician, it's an important place to be because you've got 100,000 Iowans here," said Northey, who is up for re-election in November.

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Democrats have attracted some heavy hitters of their own to the fair this year, including Democratic National Committee Chair and former Virginia Governor Tim Kaine. He'll be at the Iowa Democratic Party's booth in the Varied Industries Building on Tuesday afternoon. Joining Kaine will be U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and former Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack, along with Governor Chet Culver, Iowa Democratic Party Chair Sue Dvorsky, and Democratic state-secretary-of-agriculture nominee Francis Thicke.

Culver and Lieutenant Governor Patty Judge will also take part in a number of events at the fair, as will Republican gubernatorial nominee Branstad and his running mate, Senator Kim Reynolds. State Auditor David Vaudt will spend a lot of time at the Republicans' fair booth, as will GOP secretary-of-state nominee Matt Schultz and GOP state-treasurer nominee Dave Jamison.

Some major politicians seem to have made the fair less of a priority this year. U.S. Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) made a brief appearance Thursday -- he's not up for re-election this year -- while U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) won't be taking part in the *Des Moines Register's* political-soapbox event, despite running for re-election this year. However, Grassley will take part in the Governor's Charity Steer Show at 4 p.m. Saturday and will also meet people as his schedule permits throughout the fair's run, said Grassley campaign spokesperson Eric Woolson.

U.S. Representative Steve King (R-Iowa) also didn't commit to the speak at the soapbox but will spend about an hour at the Republicans' booth on Saturday.

Numerous political candidates have booths set up in the Varied Industries Building, including Democratic Attorney General Tom Miller, Democratic Secretary of State Michael Mauro, and Democratic State Treasurer Mike Fitzgerald.

Elder Culver Stumps for Son at Fair

Former U.S. Senator John Culver, the father of Iowa's incumbent governor, on Thursday told IowaPolitics.com that he doesn't believe Branstad has an electoral edge over his son.

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"I think he's not at all in trouble as long as the record of his administration is known in the course of the campaign," the elder Culver said during a visit to the Iowa State Fair. "I think there have been extraordinarily important measures that have been enacted through his leadership with I-JOBS, the Iowa Power Fund, and a lot of other initiatives."

John Culver is in the state to campaign with his son, with stops planned for Mason City, Waterloo, Cedar Rapids, Clinton, Iowa City, Charles City, Dubuque, and Des Moines. The governor's sister is on the campaign trail, as well. The elder Culver said that what his son has done in the areas of education and health care will improve the quality of life in the state.

"I think they're really starting to turn around," Culver said of the effort to get that story out. "It was slow getting started but frankly, I think things are looking good. If we can get the campaign on the issues that Chet has accomplished as governor for the state and the importance and the value of that, I think it's going to go very well."

Culver also said the negativity in the gubernatorial race is unfortunate, much worse than what he remembers during his stint as a politician. "I think there's been a distraction in the campaign," he said. "We've been diverted to all those other issues which to me are so peripheral and silly that they distract from the quality of life people should expect from their political leaders."

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