

Dandekar: Resignation from Iowa Senate Wasn't to Get Back at Gronstal

Written by Lynn Campbell

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The battle for control of the Iowa Senate got underway Monday, with Republican Mary Rathje announcing her candidacy for a vacant Senate seat and a gay-rights group emphasizing the importance of the November 8 special election.

“This is it. We are facing a special election, and marriage equality hangs in the balance,” wrote Troy Price, executive director of One Iowa – the state’s largest gay-rights advocacy group – in an e-mail to supporters. “If we lose the seat, we face a very real chance that a marriage ban will pass a vote in the Senate. In Iowa, marriage has never been threatened like this before.”

Swati Dandekar (D-Marion) resigned Friday from the Iowa Senate to take a \$137,000-a-year job with the three-member Iowa Utilities Board, which regulates Iowa’s utilities. The move threatens Democrats’ majority in the Iowa Senate, now reduced to 25-24.

The turn of events is key, because Democrats’ slim majority in the Iowa Senate prevented passage this year of Republican priorities ranging from a public vote on same-sex marriage to sweeping property-tax reform to a bill that Democrats criticized as bringing an end to collective bargaining.

Dandekar became emotional Monday in an interview with IowaPolitics.com as she explained that the past week hadn’t been easy. She said it hurt to hear people suggest that her move was intended to strike back at Iowa Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal (D-Council Bluffs) for not

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taking up a nuclear-power-plant bill she advocated for this past session.

“Senator Gronstal has been one of the best leaders I have worked for. He has been the best leader and best mentor I have had in politics,” said Dandekar, Iowa’s first India-born state legislator. She served in the Iowa House starting in 2002 and the Iowa Senate starting in 2008.

Dandekar said it happened in the span of four days. She said she and her husband Arvind on Thursday night took the four-and-a-half-hour, 263-mile drive from her house in Marion to Gronstal’s in Council Bluffs to tell him about her decision and “look in his eyes.”

Gronstal told IowaPolitics.com that while his conversation with Dandekar on Thursday was private, “I’m saddened that she’s leaving. I don’t agree with her decision, but it wasn’t my decision to make.”

Dandekar, who has a degree in chemistry, said the scientist in her thought it would be a great opportunity to serve Iowa in a different way. She said Iowa needs transmission lines, not just windmills.

She declined to speculate what will happen with same-sex marriage, state-funded preschool, tax cuts, and collective bargaining should Democrats lose control of the Iowa Senate.

“I have taken a new position now, and I am going to focus on what is right for Iowans from a different point of view,” she said. “I am going to make sure we have affordable and safe and secure energy for Iowans.”

Rathje First to Announce Candidacy

Rathje, a Marion resident and a member of the family that runs Rathje Construction Company, on Monday became the first to announce her candidacy for Senate District 18. She emphasized her business background.

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“We need to complete the circle,” Rathje said. “Employers want to grow and hire employees, parents want stronger schools and jobs to pay their mortgages, and graduates want job opportunities in Iowa to begin their careers. Working daily in a family-owned business and raising kids in this community has provided me a strong perspective of the issues in the area.”

Cindy Golding of rural Cedar Rapids and former U.S. Attorney Matt Dummermuth of Robins also announced their candidacies. Republicans will choose their nominee during a special nominating convention scheduled for 7 p.m. Thursday at the Longbranch Hotel in Cedar Rapids.

Democrats will select their candidate at a nominating convention on Wednesday, September 28. The only declared Democratic candidate is former TV anchor Liz Mathis of Robins. The party has also launched the KeepTheMajority.com Web site specifically for this race.

Gronstal on Monday downplayed the slight advantage that Republicans have in voter registration. As of September 1, Republicans had 15,972 registered voters in that district, while Democrats had 15,759. Independents topped both parties with 19,873 voters, according to data from the Iowa secretary of state's office.

“This is a highly competitive district,” Gronstal said. “We're going to win this race. We're not going to speculate about what might happen.”

Dandekar's Advocacy for a Nuclear-Power Plant Bill

Dandekar was the floor manager this year for Senate File 390 and House File 561, legislation that would have paved the way for MidAmerican Energy to build a second nuclear-power plant in Iowa by allowing the utility to charge its customers up-front for the potential construction of the plant. The Iowa House approved the bill 68-30, but the Senate did not debate it.

The Iowa Utilities Board estimated the legislation would have increased customers' rates by about 10 percent, or \$7 a month on an average bill of about \$70.

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Dandekar has consistently received campaign contributions from utilities, according to reports filed with the Iowa Ethics & Campaign Disclosure Board.

She received four checks totaling \$1,150 between 2006 and 2010 from the Florida Power & Light (FPL) Company Employees PAC. FPL is a subsidiary of NextEra Energy, which owns and operates five nuclear-power plants, including the Duane Arnold Energy Center near Palo.

She also accepted seven checks totaling \$2,850 between 2004 and 2010 from MidAmerican Energy Company's Effective Government Committee. And she received five checks totaling \$2,150 between 2004 and 2008 from Alliant Energy's Iowa Minnesota Governmental Action Committee.

But Dandekar said she can be fair, despite her advocacy for the nuclear-power-plant bill.

"I know that when you are looking at a given energy, you have to be fair and just. As a scientist, I can do that," Dandekar said.

Lieutenant Governor Kim Reynolds, who served with Dandekar for two years in the Iowa Senate, said Governor Terry Branstad appointed Dandekar to the Iowa Utilities Board because she's the most qualified, not because the move could take away the Democratic majority in the Senate.

Reynolds said the nuclear-power-plant issue must come through the legislature before it goes to the Iowa Utilities Board. She said Dandekar understands that Iowa must have reasonable electric costs for companies.

"I believe that Senator Dandekar will have the best interests of consumers, as well as putting forth a low-cost energy policy," she said.

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Dandekar's appointment is subject to confirmation by the Iowa Senate next year.

AARP Iowa was a vocal opponent of the nuclear-power-plant bill, because the group said it would increase customers' rates up to pay for pre-construction and construction of a potential nuclear plant, even if that plant isn't built and costs increase. But the not-for-profit, nonpartisan group that advocates for people 50 and older sidestepped any criticism of Dandekar.

Instead, AARP Iowa State Director Kent Sovern on Monday congratulated Dandekar on her nomination, saying she served her constituents well. Sovern said said AARP looks forward to working with the three members of the Iowa Utilities Board "as they work to ensure that reasonably priced, reliable, environmentally responsible, and safe utility services are available to all Iowans."

Gronstal on Monday appointed state Senator Matt McCoy (D-Des Moines) to replace Dandekar as chair of the Iowa Senate Commerce Committee.

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