

GloucesterTimes.com, Gloucester, MA

March 4, 2014

Primary challengers zoom in on Tierney

Moulton, DeFranco gear up for Tierney fight

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---- — SALEM — Richard Tisei might be a formidable opponent, but he isn't the only candidate for the 6th District seat that Congressman John Tierney has to worry about this year.

Seth Moulton of Salem and Marisa DeFranco of Middleton hope to knock the nine-term congressman out of the race by securing the Democratic nomination at September's primary.

The question is, how do you beat an entrenched candidate like Tierney?

"One voter at a time," DeFranco said. "It's talking to people on the ground."

"You win it by earning the trust of the voters you represent," Moulton said.

With the primary six months off, both candidates have begun adding texture to their campaigns and elaborating on their stances and what they'd bring to the office they seek.

Moulton was born in Salem and grew up in Marblehead, the son of a real estate lawyer and a secretary at Massachusetts General Hospital. After high school, he attended Harvard College, then joined the Marines and served four tours in Iraq over five years.

Among other highlights of his military service, Moulton was in the first company to enter Baghdad in the 2003 invasion and served as a special assistant to Lt. Gen. David Petraeus.

When he got back to the states, Moulton earned two more degrees from Harvard, then spent a year in Texas managing a company that sought to build a 240-mile high-speed rail line between Dallas and Houston. After returning to Salem, he served on the YMCA's board.

Moulton, who is running for public office for the first time, referred to his campaign team as "the best team in Democratic politics this year." It includes Mark Mellman, a pollster who has worked for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid; Joe Trippi, who previously ran Howard Dean's campaign for president; and Scott Ferson, a former press secretary of Sen. Ted Kennedy.

"I think I'm the strongest Democrat in this race," Moulton said. "When people see the energy and enthusiasm in our team, it's representative of the desire for change in the district."

Moulton, who is due to visit Gloucester today, said his campaign will gain momentum as summer approaches and that a key part of his strategy is attending regional caucuses to network with Democratic activists.

Recruiting volunteers to perform a variety of functions is also a priority right now.

“That’s what you have to do; you have to pound the pavement,” he said.

Noting that Tierney narrowly beat Tisei in the 2012 election, Moulton said it was important he get the nomination so Democrats had a shot at keeping the seat.

“I think we need a much stronger Democrat,” he said. “The fact of the matter is he only won the last election by less than 1 percent ... he should’ve won by a lot more.”

Although Moulton said he and Tierney were “similar on the issues,” he said there were two “big differences” between them.

“I want to go to Washington to actually get things done,” he said. “The second big difference is I’m going to win the general election against Richard Tisei.”

Moulton pointed to his campaign’s financial standing as evidence he will be a successful candidate. During the last quarter of 2013, he raised \$253,070, as opposed to Tierney’s \$228,408.

“There’s too much money in politics these days, but it’s, nonetheless, absolutely critical,” Moulton said.

He added that 98 percent of his donations were from individual donors and said half of Tierney’s came from political action committees.

Money’s a hot issue with DeFranco, too. She raised \$19,247 during the same time period and has pledged to run a “clean-money campaign” without funds from PACs.

“We’ve gone through a couple decades now of everybody crying about how money perverts politics, except everybody engages in this money arms race,” she said. “I’m setting out to prove that I’m actually putting my ideas where my mouth is.”

DeFranco was born and raised in Erie, Pa., the daughter of a physician and a nurse.

She attended the University of Dayton and Dublin’s Trinity College before earning her law degree from Suffolk University in Boston. She’s lived in Middleton for nine years.

DeFranco has been running an immigration law practice for nearly two decades and said her experience as a small-business owner informed two of her campaign’s central goals — cutting all government subsidies for corporations and instituting tax breaks for small businesses.

“We, as taxpayers, are subsidizing large corporations and, meanwhile, trying to run our businesses on Main Street,” said DeFranco, who actually runs her practice out of an office on Main Street in Middleton. “As everyone knows, that’s where real job creation happens.”

Another focal point for DeFranco is immigration. She said she might differ from other Democrats in that she supports a “path to legalization, not a path to citizenship.” She thinks an immigration bill recently touted by both Democratic and Republican senators is flawed.

“The Gang of Eight bill doesn’t get it right by a mile,” she said. “It’s very big-business heavy, lobbyist heavy. It’s not going to do anything to alleviate immigration issues or ... help small businesses.”

The problem is that there are two sides to the immigration debate, DeFranco said: People who want to “deport everybody,” and others who want to “give everybody citizenship in the next five years.”

“Frankly, they’re both delusional,” she said.

DeFranco said the best way to deal with immigration is to find the middle ground. She supports bolstering border and port security and then establishing a path to green cards for undocumented immigrants living in the country — even if that path takes 10 to 15 years to travel.

“We are a nation of immigrants, yes, but we are also a nation of laws,” she said. “Citizenship is not a given.”

DeFranco said right now her priority is recruiting volunteers and collecting signatures to get on the ballot. Like Moulton, she attends local caucuses. While she’s campaigning, DeFranco is also running her practice, something she said illustrates another key difference between her and her two competitors.

“I’m not wealthy enough to be a full-time candidate,” DeFranco said.

In a recent interview, Tierney declined to comment much about either Moulton or DeFranco, saying it was up to the candidates to present their cases for election.

“They’re the challengers in the race ... they have to worry about what they have to tell people,” said Tierney, whose 6th congressional district includes all of Cape Ann. “I’m busy talking with people about the great things we’ve done.”

A priority for Tierney’s campaign is keeping the good relationships he’s built with constituents, attending local caucuses and “knocking on doors,” he said.

As for Moulton’s comment that he could beat Tisei and the congressman couldn’t, Tierney disagreed.

“Apparently he wasn’t paying attention last time; we just beat Tisei,” he said. “We’re confident on this. We know we represent the values of the district.”

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