

Three Democrats seek to challenge Republican Capito - 4/30/08

By Cecelia Mason

Studio Lead: Democrats voting in the May 13th primary will choose one of three candidates running for the second congressional district. Thornton Cooper, Anne Barth and Richie Robb are hoping to challenge Republican Shelley Moore Capito in the November general election. In the first of two reports, Cecelia Mason looks at each Democrat's background:

Mason: Richie Robb, Thornton Cooper and Anne Barth aren't exactly household names in WV at this point, but one of them worked for someone who is. For 21 years Anne Barth worked in Sen. Robert Byrd's WV office:

Barth: And in that job I have headed up constituent services for the Senator in the state. Traveled to meetings and met with local state and community representatives working on projects. I was his driver for thousands of miles around the state.

Mason: Barth entered the race at the last minute after State Sen. John Unger decided not to run. Barth is the daughter of a Methodist minister. She was born in southern WV and lived in Pineville, Kingwood, Clarksburg and Charleston while growing up. Both of Barth's opponents grew up in South Charleston. Thornton Cooper attended Yale University on scholarship and graduated from WVU's Law School in 1978. Cooper says he's been involved in politics most of his life:

Cooper: I've been a political activist since I was a teenager. I mean I worked on my first Congressional campaign 40 years ago when I was at Yale and I went down to Long Island.

Mason: Cooper spent 29 years working for state government, retiring three years ago from the Public Service commission. Cooper says his job at the PSC makes him a good choice for Congress:

Cooper: I'm very familiar with the whole state because I was a regulator for the PSC, and one of the things I did was regulate the garbage companies in the state, and the wrecker companies in the state, the taxi cab and limousine companies. I became very familiar with the 55 counties.

Mason: Cooper and Barth are lifelong Democrats, unlike their opponent Richie Robb who used to be a Republican. Robb changed parties three years ago:

Robb: It gives me a perspective that the other candidates don't have. I switched parties out of a, out of conviction. It was public conviction over the past three or four years related to the Bush presidency and his invasion of Iraq.

Mason: This is the second time Robb has tried to win the Democratic nomination to run against Capito. Two years ago Robb lost the primary to Mike Callaghan. Robb served as South Charleston's mayor for 32 years. Robb made national headlines in 2004 when he served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention and announced he wouldn't vote for Pres. Bush. All three candidates have been campaigning throughout the second district. Both Robb and Barth say that the voters they talk to want change:

Barth: I am hearing from people on the campaign trail every day. There is a real desire for change.

Robb: They're angry. I've been in public life now for nearly 40 years. This is the angriest I've ever seen the public.

Mason: Robb, Barth and Cooper are hoping the discontent they see translates to votes for them. And each claims to be the best choice to take on Capito in the fall. Barth suggests her work for Senator Byrd makes her more qualified:

Barth: One thing I learned from Sen. Byrd was how to get results for WV in Washington. I've been all throughout the second district. I know what their needs and concerns are. And I would be ready to hit the ground running in Washington and work with the delegation there for positive change for WV.

Mason: Robb and Thornton both see themselves as being more like the average West Virginian than Barth. Robb points out that Barth's campaign has raised more money and received larger donations than his.

Robb: So I don't believe that she can be the agent of change that she claims to be. Now my donor base on the other hand is made up of your typical, your average West Virginians ranging anywhere from \$25-50 is about the average.

Mason: And Cooper claims to be even more average than Robb:

Cooper: I think I'm much more typical of the average West Virginian than either of my opponents. Certainly my income is closer to the average income. I'm living on a pension. I'm closer to the average West Virginian. If you look at my house I look a lot closer to the average West Virginian.

Mason: Tomorrow the three Democrats running for the Second Congressional District race will discuss their views on topics ranging from the war in Iraq to the economy.
For West Virginia Public Broadcasting I'm Cecelia Mason in Shepherdstown.