

Perriello pledges Southside is his main focus

September 12, 2008

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Martinsville Bulletin
Martinsville, VA

Democratic congressional candidate Tom Perriello is from the Charlottesville area, but if he is elected on Nov. 4, his main concern will be helping Southside get new jobs, he told local business leaders Thursday.

That is why southern Virginia is “ground zero” in his campaign for the 5th District U.S. House of Representatives seat, he told the Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce’s board on the seventh anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

Other local leaders were at the meeting as well.

Perriello, from Albemarle County, is trying to unseat longtime incumbent Virgil Goode Jr., who once was a Democrat but now is a Republican.

Perriello mentioned that seven of his eight district campaign offices are in Southside.

An independent national security analyst, Perriello said he has experience working with both Democrats and Republicans.

“Both parties have been an utter failure” in their attempts to fix the nation’s problems, he said, adding that he wants to help factions “who haven’t always seen eye to eye” work together to improve the economy.

Yet “there are no quick fixes or easy solutions to economic revival,” he said.

The vast majority of job growth today comes from small- and medium-sized businesses, Perriello said.

More emphasis needs to be placed on recruiting those types of businesses, he said, as well as relieving them of “choking burdens” by helping them cope with rising costs of energy and employee health insurance.

Chamber board member John Parkinson, who is chief executive officer of Drake Extrusion, asked for Perriello’s views on free trade. He said the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has become “a dirty word” in the region, but it has enabled Drake to expand its business.

“We live in a global economy, and there is no going back on that,” Perriello replied. But NAFTA has “been a disaster” and needs to be repealed.

“The only long-term answer” to encourage companies to create and keep jobs in the United States, he said, is “to be able to compete” better in the global economy.

That includes spending more money on work force training programs and promoting entrepreneurship, said Perriello.

He said Congress keeps providing huge amounts of aid to major industries such as oil producers and gives “peanuts” to small businesses.

“When we get incentives that encourage entrepreneurship and innovation, we will beat other countries” in the economic race, he declared.

Kim Adkins, the chamber’s former president, now is director of the West Piedmont Workforce Investment Network, a federally mandated entity that coordinates work force services in Southside. She asked Perriello if he would support reauthorizing the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

Funds for work force services are dwindling and the legislation is “kind of dying in Congress right now.” Adkins said.

Perriello said he “fully supports” reauthorizing the WIA “to help people who were kicked in the stomach” by economic downturns.

Economic development is not just about job creation and training the work force, he pointed out.

“We need to make investments that will bring young professionals back to town,” said Perriello. For instance, he said cities should invest in revitalizing their downtown areas in ways that will lure unique restaurants and other types of businesses that make a community “a fun place to be.”

The federal government also needs to invest in improvements to local infrastructure, he indicated.

Responding to a question from local developer George Lester, Perriello said he does not know the full details of issues that have postponed development of Interstate 73 that is to run through Henry County.

But I-73 “sounds like something I would go up (to Washington) and fight for,” he said. While a highway alone will not guarantee improved economic development, “it would be a good investment” in the area’s infrastructure.

Perriello said that in terms of his effectiveness as a lawmaker, Goode ranks 311th out of 435 members of the House, as well as ranks 60th out of 66 members of the House Appropriations Committee. Those rankings are from the Roll Call newspaper's Power Rankings.

He acknowledged that Goode has helped Southside get federal funds for various projects.

In terms of improving Southside's economy, though, "a few earmarks" from time to time "just won't do it," he said.

"The decisions made in Washington have a tremendous impact on our lives," Perriello said. Pledging to work "double shifts" as a lawmaker, he added that he believes he can "do more for Southside Virginia than we've seen in the past" under Goode's leadership.