

Byrnes faces 2 this Nov. 4

State's economy central point of campaigns

BY ART AISNER
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State Rep. Pam Byrnes wants to make her mark on the Legislature with a third and final term representing the 52nd District, but first she'll have to get past two election opponents who believe she has little business returning to the State Capitol.

Both Republican Eric Lielbriedis and Libertarian John Boyle argue Byrnes, D-Lyndon Township, is part of the problem preventing Michigan's economic recovery. They charge that her support of tax increases, her strong partisanship and her heavy campaign support from special interests are all reasons for change.

Lielbriedis, a commercial real estate agent from Saline, said he has been politically active behind the scenes for years and was happy to stay there until the Legislature replaced Michigan's Single



Byrnes



Lielbriedis



Boyle

FOR THE RECORD

Photos misidentified

The photos of state representative candidates Eric Lielbriedis and John Boyle were inadvertently switched in a story that appeared on page A3 Thursday.



Eric Lielbriedis



John Boyle

52ND DISTRICT FROM A3

State's downward spiral prompts opposing priorities

Business Tax in 2007.

"I was very disturbed by that \$2.4 billion tax increase because it's absolutely the wrong thing to do when wages in the state are down and joblessness is on the rise. We cannot tax ourselves to prosperity," he said.

If voters elect him Nov. 4, he said he'd work to revamp Michigan's tax code and is warming toward a fair-tax, or consumption tax, concept. That's where people pay only according to what goods or services they purchase.

Lielbriedis also supports a part-time Legislature and he is behind Attorney General Mike Cox's initiative to create a searchable Web site to post all state spending - everything from department programs to employee salaries.

Byrnes, first elected in 2004 after several unsuccessful attempts, said she also favors scaling back legislative sessions to improve productivity. But she cautions legislators would still have to step up constituent work in their districts in between truncated sessions to make them as efficient as possible.

A lawyer by trade, Byrnes argues she's been an effective advocate for her district's constituents and that her most important work lies ahead.

A former county road commissioner, she entered the Legislature with plans to bolster coordinated transportation plans statewide and to reform education. Michigan's downward economic spiral, while having a big impact on both K-12 and higher education, has superseded significant progress in both areas, she said. But Byrnes said both are still intricate components to the state's economic survival and revival.

She said improving funding to U-M and Michigan's other research universities and strengthening the work force will attract businesses, as evidenced the 21st Century Jobs Plan. That plan was staunchly supported two years ago by Byrnes, along with her caucus and Gov. Jennifer Granholm. The initiative infused millions specifically into Washtenaw County because of the emphasis on life sciences, but Byrnes said she isn't opposed to re-evaluating it and tweaking it to favor business and job creation.

She rebutted campaign attacks about her tax record as typical Republican rhetoric.

"It's easy to look at the economic crisis we're having and blame the last five years, but it's been in the making for decades as manufacturing has diminished in Michigan," By-

rnes said.

Boyle, who considers himself an independent but identifies with the Libertarian platform of limited government and minimal taxation, blames Byrnes and other legislators for not doing more to reign in spending.

"We can't afford the government we have," said Boyle, a political and strategic consultant for more than 25 years.

He says an even bigger economic crisis caused by the state's unfunded liabilities to retirees, particularly for health benefits, is looming as the baby boomer generation ages. To combat it, Boyle suggests raising the retirement age for public employees to bring the costs of retiree medical and pension benefits into the "realm of affordability."

He also advocates consolidating the number of townships and cities statewide, as well as a long-term goal of reducing the number of K-12 school districts. The millions saved in overhead could be funneled to instruction.

He admits it would be difficult to garner bi-partisan agreement on those issues, but he says they are necessary.

"If you like what Lansing has given you the past four years - higher taxes, bigger

government and pandering to the special interest instead of debating deep, philosophical changes we need to survive - than send the same people back."

Byrnes is endorsed by the leading law enforcement and firefighter unions, the Michigan Education Association, and several environmental organizations.

If re-elected, Byrnes said she will run for speaker pro-tem, which would ensure a spot at the leadership table, where she said she could influence the direction of some legislation. "I want to make progress on alternative funding for our roads, mass transit or rail with regional collaboration, and build private and public partnerships that are necessary to have a long-term impact."

Byrnes, though untested in the primary, raised roughly \$85,500 this campaign cycle and had \$54,078 on hand, according to campaign-finance reports filed last month.

Both Lielbriedis and Boyle requested campaign finance form waivers, indicating they did not expect to raise more than \$1,000.

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