

Herald News (Passaic County, NJ)

August 11, 2011 Thursday  
AE Edition

## NOW IS NOT A GOOD TIME TO LINK WITH THE TEA PARTY

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**SECTION:** OUR TOWNS; Pg. D04

**LENGTH:** 956 words

John Driscoll, the Republican state Senate candidate from Paramus, is hitting the hustings Friday with "my congressman," Scott Garrett, politely pestering voters hovering over their eggs and coffee in diners.

The duo had better hope that some voter doesn't pour a pot of tea over their heads.

The Driscoll-Garrett campaign tandem comes amid the first wave of debt ceiling-S&P downgrade reviews panning Congress's performance -- especially the conduct of Republican congressmen. And especially Republican congressmen closely allied with the Tea Party zealots whose intransigence brought the United States to the brink of default. Garrett is a Republican congressman who voted against the compromise because the spending cuts were too small and because the deal didn't include a plan for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution -- an idea ridiculed by John McCain as a delusion of "Tea Party Hobbits."

Garrett espoused Tea Party principles before Sarah Palin took a seat on the Wasilla City Council. With the exception of Garrett's defense of hedge fund plutocrats, his political philosophy is nearly identical to the Tea Party platform. He takes a strict constitutionalist view of government power and draws a hard line on government spending, opposing relief for victims of Hurricane Katrina or extending benefits for the unemployed.

So with this profile and with signs of a brewing backlash, why would Driscoll join himself to Garrett, and in public? After all, Driscoll is not running in a safe, Republican stronghold. The 38th Legislative District is a difficult-to-predict tossup, which means he'll need to woo disgruntled Democrats and independents if he has any chance of dislodging Bob Gordon, the Democratic incumbent from Fair Lawn. Both parties are expected to pour millions of dollars into the race, financing negative mailers and possibly TV ads.

Driscoll and his handlers are now giving the Democrats a potential cornucopia of photos for those ads - Driscoll chumming around diners with the hero of the Tea Party Hobbits. Wouldn't he be better off inviting Garrett to a closed door fund-raiser, or taking some of that Scott Garrett Victory Fund largess that has helped boost Bergen and Passaic candidates in recent years? Wouldn't he be better off just reprising former U.S. Senate candidate Tom Kean Jr.'s avoidance strategy of 2006? Kean arrived late at his own fund-raiser in Newark after the guest, the unpopular Vice President Dick Cheney, had already left. Kean blamed it on traffic-clogged Route 1, when he could have easily taken the turnpike.

Shouldn't Driscoll pull off the same stunt, blaming (more plausibly) Route 17 traffic?

Not going to happen.

"You know what? The congressman offered to help and I am willing to accept his help just as I am sure if [former] Governor Corzine called up Bob Gordon to help with the election," said Driscoll, who is the Republican freeholder chairman in Bergen County. "I'm sure he would he would accept it, too."

The 38th District added more Republican voters following the once-a-decade redrawing on the state's 40 legislative borders last April. So despite the importance of independents, Driscoll will also need a strong turnout from the Republican base, which now includes Tea Party activists. Garrett is a hero to the conservatives and Tea Party base -- nearly 200 people came to hear him speak Tuesday at a Wyckoff event sponsored by the West Bergen Tea Party.

Driscoll also says he'll have the support of a whole gamut of Republicans, ranging from conservatives like Sen. Gerald Cardinale of Demarest to moderates like Bergen County Executive Kathleen Donovan, and her longtime ally, Ridgewood's Eleanor Nissley. "Eleanor always has my back," Driscoll said.

He was quick to mention that Donovan, the bane of the Bergen GOP right-wingers, also stumped with Garrett last year without any harm to her campaign. Besides, Garrett's conservative, outside-the-mainstream conservatism is old news to 5th Congressional District voters, which he has represented since 2002. If there was any unhappiness with his inflexible iconoclasm, it's hard to tell from election results - he was returned to office with 56 percent of the vote in 2006 and 65 percent in 2008. And now, with conservatives and the Tea Party ascendant, Garrett has moved from the fringe to the party's front ranks in the House.

But Donovan's campaign was last year, before the debt-debacle, the plunging stock markets, and the talk of a double-dip recession. For the moment, Republicans are bearing the brunt of the bad news. A CNN survey Tuesday found that just 33 percent of Americans approve of the Republican Party, while 59 percent disapprove. The last time CNN polled the GOP out of favor with more than 50 percent was in 1998, when the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Bill Clinton on Dec. 19, 1998, according to The Hill newspaper.

Other polls indicate that the public has blamed Republicans more than Democrats for the debt debacle. And a Pew Research/Washington Post survey found that the public's attitude about the Tea Party soured considerably - a near reversal of sentiment from eight months ago.

Those numbers may explain why Driscoll depicted himself as a non-partisan public servant.

"I don't look at labels. If you look at labels when you get in, you're in for the wrong reason," Driscoll said. "You're there to help the general population as a whole."

Noble sentiment, of course, but he wears the Republican label woven with Tea Party threads, and for the moment at least, it's not an easy one to wear.