Dillon courts diverse base in governor's race

TIM MARTIN - Associated Press Writer - Associated Press

Andy Dillon doesn't fit neatly into any of the stereotypes that typically shape Michigan politics.

The Democrat has been difficult to typecast ever since winning a state House special election in November 2004. He has clashed with some labor unions, upset environmental groups and opposes abortion.

But the lawmaker from Wayne County's Redford Township says he's fed up with partisan politics and is betting that enough voters feel the same way to make him Michigan's next governor.

"I've got the best base — and that's the average citizen out there who doesn't live and breathe government every day. They just want some common-sense policies to move forward in the state," says Dillon, 48, who faces Lansing Mayor Virg Bernero in the Aug. 3 Democratic primary.

"It's the silent majority out there that has their own opinions of the world, and Democratic primary voters — my message resonates with them. They want someone that will demonstrate an independent streak and do what they think is right, get away from the partisan bickering."

That message has helped earn Dillon primary race endorsements from a diverse range of organizations including the Teamsters union and the Detroit Regional Chamber. He leads Bernero in recent polls, though a large number of Democratic voters remain undecided, and was the first Democratic candidate to run ads in the race.

The Michigan AFL-CIO is putting its political muscle behind Bernero. It says Dillon has pushed for too many concessions or policy changes that could lessen public employee benefits during his tenure as House speaker. Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney describes Dillon as "practically a Republican."

Before getting into politics, Dillon had a lucrative career as a business turnaround specialist with companies such as GE Capital and Wynnchurch Capital. When Democrats grabbed control of the state House in the 2006 election, they made Dillon the chamber's leader in part because he'd proven he could work with Republicans on key initiatives.

Dillon successfully led efforts to pass new energy legislation, including measures aimed at promoting renewable sources such as wind and solar, though some environmental groups say his energy policies are too open to building new coal-fired power plants.

He also was a leader in adopting the 21st Century Jobs Fund, a program aimed at diversifying Michigan's economy with investments in alternative energy, life sciences, advanced manufacturing and homeland security.

He hasn't always agreed with the policies of Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm and has struggled to consistently steer the Democratic majority in the House in the same direction. He has clashed with Republican Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop on some issues and been criticized by some Democrats when he has gone along with Republican budget proposals.

The worst impasse between the state's leaders led to a four-hour partial shutdown of state government when the Legislature failed to agree on a balanced budget by midnight on Oct. 1, 2007. A hastily approved budget compromise raised the state's income tax rate and reconfigured business taxes. That angered an anti-tax group that tried to recall Dillon.

If it weren't for that development and how 2007 played out, Dillon — frustrated with the partisan gridlock in Lansing — says he might not have run again in 2008. But he wouldn't give his critics that satisfaction, easily defeating the recall effort and cruising to another two-year House term.

"It made him dig in his heels and try to make things happen for the betterment of the state," says Miles Handy, a long-time Dillon friend and a former Redford Township supervisor. "It gave him the fire in the belly to want to take that next step."

Friends say Dillon, a former University of Notre Dame cross country and track captain, is as competitive as anyone in the governor's race despite a low-key, relatively soft-spoken approach.

One of most cerebral lawmakers in Lansing, Dillon is more comfortable delivering policy papers than political sound bites. But he has grown more comfortable giving campaign speeches and he spends time after most of them talking one-on-one with people who attend in hopes of refining his detailed policy ideas.

Dillon earned accounting and law degrees from Notre Dame and worked in cities ranging from New York City and Washington to Phoenix before returning to Michigan at 29. The married father of four doesn't live too far from his parents' home in the same area outside of Detroit where he grew up. His sons attend Detroit Catholic Central — just as Dillon, his brother and his father did.

Michigan's economic troubles have hit home in Dillon's neighborhood with unemployment, foreclosures and service cutbacks caused by government budget problems.

"I feel like I'm on the side of the road and I'm watching a crash," Dillon says when asked why he's running for governor. "Either you're going to walk away or you're going to go help put the tourniquet on. I think at this one point in time in the history of the state, you need someone who has both that private sector plus public sector

(experience). You need the combination."

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Online:

Andy Dillon's campaign site: http://www.andydillon.com

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