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ELECTION 2006

Trouble in his own backyard

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October 15, 2006

GREECE, N.Y. -- Around her, the Green Acre Farm and Nursery is busy with customers snapping up apples, pumpkins and pots of mums. But co-owner Janice Hassett is happy to take a minute to vent about the local Republican congressman, Rep. Tom Reynolds, and his role in the Mark Foley page scandal.

"The whole thing makes me sick," says Hassett, 33, a staunch Republican in this staunchly Republican Rochester suburb, and - until now - a Reynolds voter. "My opinion of congressmen in general continues to go down, and now to have it happen in our own backyard is a shame. It's just horrible."

Seventy-five or so miles away in the Buffalo suburb of North Tonawanda, at the other end of New York's 26th Congressional District, Karen Eggert says pretty much the same thing about Reynolds, who has been under fire for not doing enough last spring when he learned about unusually personal e-mails from Foley that had upset a 16-year-old former page from Louisiana and his parents.

"He knew all about it and didn't do a thing," asserted Eggert, 47, a one-time Reynolds backer, as she rushed into a grocery store last week. "... He didn't think of the kids or anyone but himself."

Obstacle to keep the House

Less than a month before Election Day, that refrain spells trouble for Reynolds, 56, arguably the most powerful member of New York's congressional delegation, and shows just how difficult the Foley scandal has made it for Republicans to succeed in their struggle to win enough contested races nationally to keep control of the House.

The four-term lawmaker says he acted appropriately by informing House Speaker Dennis Hastert, and had no foreknowledge of the sexually explicit e-mails to other pages that later led to Foley's resignation.

But critics say the e-mails Reynolds did know about demanded sterner action, and after a Buffalo News poll last weekend that showed him trailing Democrat Jack Davis by a stunning 48-33 margin in this heavily Republican district, Reynolds took to the airwaves with an extraordinary 60-second mea culpa.

"Nobody's angrier and more disappointed that I didn't catch his lies," Reynolds says of Foley in the ad. "I trusted that others had investigated. Looking back, more should have been done, and for that, I am sorry."

A former state Assembly minority leader and Erie County Republican boss, Reynolds was first elected to the House in 1998. Known as an astute tactician with a personable touch, he now heads up the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee, the fundraising juggernaut that funnels money to critical House races across the country.

Often mentioned as a potential successor to House Speaker Dennis Hastert, he has a safe district tailored to accommodate his leadership role in Washington, with 40,000 more Republicans than Democrats. He handily defeated Davis by a 56-44 margin in 2004.

With their control of the House already hanging by a thread in far more marginal districts, the 26th is a place the GOP

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can't afford to lose, experts say.

"If the Republicans lose this district," said Jim Campbell, a University of Buffalo political scientist, "they've lost the House."

Also a personal problem

While the Foley scandal has been a problem for Republicans generally, it has special complications for Reynolds. Although he says he alerted Hastert about the non-explicit e-mail last spring, Hastert says he doesn't remember. And Reynolds' chief of staff Kirk Fordham had previously held the same position with Foley for 10 years.

Fordham tried to persuade ABC not to air the sexually explicit e-mails that led to Foley's resignation in late September. Reynolds, who was not available for comment on this story, says he never gave Fordham the OK to contact ABC. Fordham has resigned from Reynolds' staff.

Reynolds' campaign's official position is that in the end, voters will care more about local issues than about Foley. "It's an issue people have some questions on, but I think Tom has answered the questions," said his press secretary, L.D. Davis.

Still, the going has been rough. Last week, a Pennsylvania Republican congressman canceled a fundraiser with Reynolds, and presidential hopeful Sen. John McCain backed out of a planned Friday appearance with Reynolds in Erie County. Despite denials, the local media treated both incidents as signs he was becoming politically toxic.

At the same time, Davis, a labor union and an independent Democratic group are all running ad campaigns focused on Foley, and for some voters, such as Hassett, they are having the desired effect. Some GOP leaders worry that Republican voters who focus on issues of morality and values may be particularly sensitive to the Foley issue.

Still on his side

Still, Reynolds supporters say he has plenty of time to overcome the Foley issue. They point to voters such as Mel Puscheck, 76, of North Tonawanda, who said he is following the Foley story intently, but suspects the media is distorting Reynolds' role.

"If he was aware and didn't do anything about it, that would bother me," Puscheck said. "But until they show me otherwise, he's still my man."

Bruce Schmidt, the recently retired GOP chairman in rural Orleans County, said he's confident that by November, the faithful will remember Reynolds' efforts on local projects, such as the local ethanol plant he supported, and the Foley scandal will have receded from the front pages.

"To deny that it has affected the race would be ridiculous," he said. "But I don't think the problems are as serious as they're portrayed. All politics are local, and Tom Reynolds has done many things for his district."

Some experts, however, suspect that - for Reynolds - that formula may not work.

"All politics are local, and for that reason, most Republicans may end up escaping the Foley scandal," said Bob McClure, who teaches political science at Syracuse University. "But in Tom Reynolds' district, Foley now is a local matter."

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