

Democrats stress unity, put aside sting of '02

Former Sen. Jean Carnahan endorses Gov. Holden in 2004 re-election bid.

By Aaron Desjardis
NEWS LEADER

Missouri Democrats threw a party Saturday night in Springfield, and in the process tried to rally one.

Congressman Dick Gephardt, buoyed by polling, showing him ahead of the pack of Democratic presidential aspirants, declared, "I'm going to defeat George Bush

in 2004." And before a crowded ballroom of party dignitaries, for mer U.S. Sen. Jean Carnahan delivered an early endorsement of Gov. Bob Holden for a re-election



Carnahan



Holden

bid that could pit him against a seasoned primary opponent in Auditor Claire McCaskill.

"We need to be there for our governor, who has endured all kinds of abuse

for doing the right thing," Carnahan implored before a crowded Clarion Hotel ballroom.

The moment was one catalyst in the two-day Jackson Day Democratic rally, which adopted the theme "We're all in this together" in part to smooth over last year's stinging

election defeats across the state and nation. Foremost on the plate of state party leaders has been avoiding potentially damaging primaries next year. Besides the governor's race, key Democrats are

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'We want to ... take back control'

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eyeing a 2004 challenge to Republican Sen. Christopher Bond, most notably Lt. Gov. Joe Maxwell and state higher education commissioner Quentin Wilson.

Maxwell said he was leaning toward running and would make up his mind by the end of the state's legislative session next month.

"I need to know if there's enough fire in the Democrats' belly to take on an incumbent senator," Maxwell said. "This guy (Bond) can flip a switch and raise as much money as he needs."



Gephardt

Wilson said he has had an interest in the seat, but was focusing for the moment on education issues.

Another potential candidate feeling out the terrain has one of the most recognized names in Missouri politics.

Robin Carnahan, 41, a St. Louis attorney and daughter of the former Sen. Carnahan, said she was weighing a bid for state secretary of state in 2004.

"I'm thinking seriously about it," she said. "There are a few more phone calls I have to make."

Hoping to use that name to avert another potential party showdown, Jean Carnahan surprised many by throwing her support behind Holden even through McCaskill hasn't announced she's running for governor.

"Any time you have a primary, it's not a good situation," Carnahan said shortly before the endorsement. "That's a decision Claire's going to have to make on her own."

McCaskill said she would let the people of Missouri decide the question.

"There are just a whole lot of people who are asking us to do this," McCaskill said.

McCaskill managed to grab attention inadvertently earlier in the evening, when a man supporting her possible run for governor was arrested outside the hotel.

Steven Reed, a local political activist who has created a fundraising committee called Citizens Supporting McCaskill for Governor, was arrested by Springfield police along with another man, while handing out leaflets that read "Draft Claire!" and "It is time for a change of the guard."

The fireworks that followed came courtesy of Holden and Gephardt.

"Dick Gephardt is everything our current president is not," Holden told the packed ballroom, prompting a loud round of applause. "I thought that might get a rise out of you."

Gephardt took his own shots at the president, criticizing Bush for inheriting an economy in high times that has since shed 2 million jobs.

"I sometimes think it's our plight in life to deal with the messes the Republicans make of economic policies," Gephardt said, adding, "I'll be the best damn janitor you've ever seen!"

Gephardt, the former House minority leader who ran for president in 1988, spent little of his stage time discussing Iraq, saying, "Our hearts and prayers" were with the soldiers.

Lisa Cooper, 48, a former director of international admissions for Drury University whose position was recently "downsized," complained during a youth forum earlier Saturday that Democrats' traditional messages weren't resonating in the public psyche as they used to. Party politicians should be spending more time talking about the sad shape of the economy, she said, and asking honest questions about the war in Iraq.

"I think they're too afraid to polarize the public by taking a stand," she said.

"The Republicans have managed to convince the population that to be anything less than supportive of the president is unpatriotic."

That goes for Gephardt, too, she said, offering her assessment only after a nervous glance around the room.

"I think he could improve."