

## District 6 odds tough for Dem

### An observer says GOP incumbent U.S. Rep. Cliff Stearns feels 'safe in his seat.'

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If the ballot in the 6th Congressional District looks familiar this year, it's because the same two candidates ran for the House seat last election. And the election before that.

Incumbent Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Ocala, is seeking his 10th term in a race against Democrat Dave Bruderly in a district snaking through seven counties from the outskirts of Jacksonville and into The Villages.

Bruderly, an environmental engineer from Gainesville, is making his third try at unseating Stearns, who has raised more money and gained influence in Washington as a veteran member of the majority.

As in years past, Bruderly, 59, is running on an alternative-energy platform. He said a solid policy could address national concerns ranging from global warming to the war in Iraq.

This year, public awareness about fuel dependency and climate change gives him hope that his ideas will stick with voters.

"The issues that I started to discuss [in the first election] are finally coming out," Bruderly said. "Today, the facts are coming out."

Political analysts say Stearns' \$2.3 million campaign war chest, 18 years in office and allegiance to his constituency make him virtually unbeatable.

Stearns, 65, sits on both the Veterans' Affairs and Energy and Commerce Committees. He chairs the subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection.

From those committees, he investigated price gouging after Hurricane Katrina and helped secure funding to create a veterans cemetery in Jacksonville and build a veterans hospital in Marion County.

The motel-hotel millionaire considers national security his primary issue. He thinks that illegal immigrants should not be granted amnesty and that the administration needs "metrics," or ways to measure progress in Iraq and gauge when troops should leave.

Both candidates consider themselves fiscally conservative.

Bruderly supports policies that protect American jobs from outsourcing. Stearns thinks Americans whose jobs move overseas should be offered training that teaches them new job skills.

Stearns touts specific accomplishments for consumers, ranging from anti-spyware legislation to a car-title bill that protects consumers from unwittingly buying cars flooded by hurricanes. He also expresses concern about trade with China and competition from Brazilian oranges hurting Florida's citrus industry.

Bruderly wants to eliminate dependence on foreign oil by 2025. He chastises Congress for protecting the status quo, ignoring opportunities to decrease pollution and failing to provide incentives that promote cleaner, more efficient energy sources. He said lawmakers should create incentives to develop alternative energy sources and tighten environmental regulations.

Although Stearns said Bruderly should have "a certain amount of democracy," he has turned down Bruderly's requests for public debate.

"I beat him twice," Stearns said. "I thought to myself, 'Why should I debate him when he always goes negative?'"

He later added: "I just don't find him a credible individual, though I respect him."

Bruderly shoots back with cynicism about Stearns' early campaign platforms, which included term limits for House members. Stearns said he never signed a promise to leave office. He brought the issue before the House several times and voted for it, but the measure never passed.

Stearns' hesitancy to debate "shows he feels very safe in his seat, which a lot of Republicans must be pretty envious of right now," said University of Central Florida political scientist Aubrey Jewett, an associate professor who specializes in Florida politics.

It also releases Stearns from some normal campaign duties, allowing him time to tour the state, helping fellow Republicans, Jewett said.

Jewett points out that former House Speaker Newt Gingrich -- like Bruderly -- ran for Congress twice and lost.

"The third time he went on to orchestrate the Republican takeover," Jewett said.

Yet, Jewett said Bruderly faces a significant challenge in beating a Republican incumbent in the district, which includes more than 33,000 voters in Lake.

Stearns has faced a series of write-in and otherwise weak candidates, allowing him to amass one of the largest congressional campaign funds in Florida, according to the most recent federal filing.

"You never want to say a seat is safe, and you never want to take a race for granted," said Jeff Sadosky, spokesman for the Florida Republican Party. "But I think he is in one of the strongest positions in the nation."

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