

ELECTION 2006

Democrat says GOP incumbent ducking debates

David Bruderly plans to attend forums -- Cliff Stearns does not.

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Democrat David Bruderly, a Gainesville resident who is running in a congressional district that includes Lady Lake and part of The Villages, says U.S. Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Ocala, is avoiding a debate with him.

"This guy [Stearns] is totally unwilling to present his issues face-to-face with me," Bruderly said Thursday. "And that's tragic."

Bruderly, an environmental-engineering consultant, faces off against Stearns in the Nov. 7 general election. It will be their third matchup. Bruderly lost previous bids in 2002 and 2004.

Stearns, who was first elected to the House in 1988, was unavailable for comment. Stearns' campaign manager Mike Whitehead said that during the past few weeks, Stearns has been deluged with a huge number of requests to attend candidate forums -- and the congressman can't attend all of them.

"It just seems this year there are five times the number of these events than there have been in the past two years combined," Whitehead said.

Bruderly, however, said Stearns has no intention of debating him.

Dave Neal, a history teacher at Middleburg High School in Clay County, said Roy Lyons, chairman of the Clay Republican Executive Committee, told him a few weeks ago that he and Stearns would be willing to participate in a question-and-answer session with students that was to include Bruderly.

But Thursday, Neal said he received a call from Lyons informing him that Stearns would not be able to attend. Stearns also canceled plans to attend a Tiger Bay luncheon and candidate forum sponsored by Leadership Gainesville.

Bruderly said Thursday he plans to attend those events -- as well as a candidate forum at Pennbrooke Fairways in Leesburg that Whitehead said will be attended by a Stearns campaign staffer but not the congressman himself -- even if his opponent isn't there.

District 6 stretches from just west of Jacksonville south to the Lady Lake-Leesburg area of Lake County.

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