

## Candidates: U.S. Congress District 2

What's the prize for the Democratic winner in this large South Jersey district? A chance, most likely, to challenge the well-known, nine-term incumbent

By **Tara Nurin**, June 1, 2012 in

One of three Democratic candidates for Congress in New Jersey's 2nd District -- Viola Hughes, Cassandra Shober and Gary Stein -- will emerge victorious on primary day June 5, but the November election is going to be a lot tougher to win.

That's because it's hard to unseat a well-known incumbent like Rep. Frank LoBiondo, a Republican who has been in office for nine terms. LoBiondo has his own primary challenge to contend with, though, before he gets on the general election ballot.

"It would be a major upset if [LoBiondo] were to lose either in the general or primary election," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute for Politics at Rutgers University. "[He's] been in office a long time and is well known in the district."

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Challenging LoBiondo is Mike Assad, a 24-year-old Tea Party activist. Assad, who's serving his second term on Absecon's school board, describes himself on his website as a "small government conservative" who will not "bow to big labor" or be " beholden to the environmental lobby on Capitol Hill."

LoBiondo and Assad did not respond to requests to discuss their positions.



Cassandra Shober

in his backyard."

On the Democratic side, political newcomer Shober has raised approximately \$17,000 and boasts endorsements from three quarters of the district's Democratic party committees. Campaigning on the arms of the local Democratic establishment, the Ventnor office manager espouses a pro-middle class message that emphasizes affordable healthcare, benefits for veterans and seniors, elimination of tax cuts for the wealthy, and the use of infrastructure improvements to create jobs.

Shober said that despite a lack of political experience, a relatively small financial war chest, and a possible eventual face-off against an entrenched office holder, she's running to win. "The divide between the middle class and the upper class has become huge," she said. "Whether you're working in casinos or construction, we're all facing the same challenges. Some of our counties are running at double-digit unemployment. And the current congressman's voting record would suggest he doesn't have any idea what's going on

But at least one of her two rivals in the primary race isn't buying her message. Stein, a house cleaner from Egg Harbor City, frequently attacks Shober. "She wants to raise taxes on the rich and she says what you need to do is start hiring more policemen, firemen and teachers," said Stein. "How are Republicans going to work with her? She's going there with the same old stuff."



Gary Stein

Stein ran for Congress as an independent in 2008 and 2010 and ran for governor in 2009 as a stunt. After a long history as both a Democrat who campaigned for George McGovern and a Republican who voted for LoBiondo six times. He only recently re-registered as a Democrat for the chance to run against LoBiondo in the general election once, Stein said, he started paying attention to LoBiondo's voting record.

Stein's positions are unencumbered by strict party allegiances. He favors amnesty for undocumented workers as a precursor to sealing the borders (and brags about housing illegal immigrants for free). He champions single-payer universal healthcare. He calls the vote to bail out the auto industry "wrong" and calls the troop surge "dead wrong." He also champions a tax plan that would eliminate corporate taxes and abolish income taxes for the bottom 90 percent of earners. These losses would be offset by the

imposition of a nationwide 3 percent sales tax.

He calls his plan "aspirational" and believes a win by a janitor would attract attention as an unusual "man bites dog" news story. Stein admits he doesn't know how to get voters to listen to his message. His campaign signs are constructed of inexpensive plywood because he's raised no money. In fact, he hasn't even implemented a method for collecting donations. "I have to figure out how to get Pay Pal on my website. It was too much trouble so I didn't do it," he said.



Viola Hughes

The third Democrat, the former mayor of Fairfield Township, is almost equally cavalier when it comes to her fundraising efforts. When asked if she'd reached the \$5,000 threshold the FEC requires for candidate financial disclosure filings Hughes replied, "I think someone has given me a \$25 donation."

Despite her lack of funds, Cumberland County's Democratic Party has endorsed its native daughter. The ordained minister was the first female African-American mayor in the county and the second in the state. She has served as a member of the Governor's Council for Affordable Housing and a program development specialist for the state Department of Corrections. When she ran against LoBiondo in 2006, she garnered 37 percent of the vote.

Hughes listed her desire to increase bipartisanship, create jobs, defer student loan payments, make schools safer and expand affordable health coverage as priorities if elected. On the environment, she said, "Corporations are allowed to run the emissions into the air but what happens when me or you don't recycle our bottles or cans? We get a fine ... We have to teach the next generation global warming is happening but don't put it on the average American citizen."

The incumbent, meanwhile, is considered moderate for his party -- a fact that helps him repeatedly get elected in a district that has more registered Democrats than Republicans and can swing blue in state races. His economically disadvantaged, largely rural South Jersey district has rewarded him for breaking from his party on certain microeconomic issues: He objected to cutting benefit programs like food stamps and Meals on Wheels without first trimming subsidies to the oil and gas industry, though he did vote with Republicans against healthcare reform.



Rep. Frank LoBiondo

LoBiondo sits on the Armed Services Committee and the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and he chairs the Coast Guard & Maritime Transportation Subcommittee of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. The Coast Guard assignment is fitting: His mammoth district spans the Shore from Cape May to Ocean counties and includes Atlantic City's Coast Guard Air Station and field office and the Coast Guard Training Center in Cape May.



Mike Assad

Assad devotes a sizeable portion of his campaign messaging to energy policy, outlining his opposition to cap-and-trade, which places a mandatory cap on emissions while providing flexibility in complying with the cap. On his web site, he says that by relying on American fossil fuels, constructing the Keystone XL Pipeline and drilling into Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge oil reserves, the federal government can preserve and create jobs and keep gasoline prices steady.

LoBiondo and Assad share similar viewpoints on energy, according to their campaign literature and published reports. As the representative to a district with a heavy concentration of oil refineries and a nuclear power plant, LoBiondo also opposes cap-and-trade, and in his first campaign newsletter to supporters, he touts his lobbying efforts for the Keystone Pipeline and his opposition to newly proposed EPA regulations.

Assad's views on energy and his support of term limits have earned him an endorsement from the Conservative Party of New Jersey, which lauded him for being "a new breed of politician who understands repealing and regulation are needed to unleash American Exceptionalism, create jobs and protect the sovereignty of the United States." But Assad hasn't just been noticed by right-wing organizations. The Press of Atlantic City has recognized his efforts to make his school district's operations more accountable to the public, and in 2009, Atlantic City Weekly included him in its "Top 40 Under 40."

LoBiondo has been endorsed by the Republican parties in all eight of the counties into which the district stretches, as well as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which awarded him its national Spirit of Enterprise award this year for his pro-business voting record. He gets mixed approval ratings from labor organizations, though an analysis by ProjectVoteSmart.com shows that, at the federal level, union support for LoBiondo has waned considerably. No stranger to small business, LoBiondo worked in his family's trucking business for 26 years prior to his election to Congress. His deep roots in Cumberland County have proven useful when raising money: As of May 16, the congressman had raised more than \$825,000, while Assad reported no earnings to the Federal Election Commission.

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