

June 28, 2009

Sunday Conversation with Jay Webber

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is another of our "Sunday Conversations," a question and answer interview with a prominent Morris County person. Today, we feature Assemblyman Jay Webber, R-Morris Plains, who just became chairman of the New Jersey Republican Committee. Webber, 37, and his wife, Johanna, have four children. Webber is also an attorney specializing in commercial law.

Q: How did this new job come about?

A: Chris Christie approached me right around the primary. He said, "If things work out," would you consider taking the position as chairman of the Republican party. We waited until after the primary to really talk about specifics. (Christie won the Republican gubernatorial nomination in the June primary). He thought I could bring a new energy to the party, a kind of generational change.

Q: What type of energy would you bring?

A: I'll try to be a very active, visible chairman, getting up and down the state to talk to (county) party chairmen, rank and file, candidates. And I think there's a value to just bringing a new perspective to the state committee. You know, the previous chairman, Tom Wilson, had been there for four years and he served admirably under difficult conditions.

Q: How admirably did he serve, considering that Republicans really didn't win much in Wilson's tenure?

A: Yeah, well, when you're the party chairman and your party is entirely out of power, it's not an easy job. And I think everybody recognizes that. He did his best under difficult circumstances. But I think that's going to change, it's going to start changing this year. I think there's a new found confidence and energy and enthusiasm in the party. And most of that's due to Chris Christie and I think we will be very successful in the fall. And that will make the chairman's job much easier.

Q: Is it Chris Christie, or is it due to the fact the Democrats have messed up?

A: It has more to do with Chris Christie.

Q: You really think so?

A: I really do. There's a deep disaffection with Jon Corzine and the Democratic party, there's no secret to that. And that will be part of the reason we're successful in the fall. But Chris is a great candidate. I really believe that. He's got a confidence and a vision for the state that appeals to the people he meets. The better they get to know him, the better they like him.

Q: You meet an old friend of yours who is not a registered Republican. How do you get that person to become a voting Republican?

A: I tell him that this is a crucial, crucial year for the state of New Jersey. People say this all the time, but there is no hyperbole when I say this is the most important gubernatorial election in my lifetime.

Q: Well, you're a young guy.

A: I am a young guy. I don't know how many gubernatorial elections I've seen ... probably nine. I think the state's at a tipping point, I really do. And people feel it. The average middle class taxpayer understands that they have had relatives, friends, co-workers, who have had to leave the state, because they can't afford to live here anymore. And if we don't do something quickly,

they'll have to move out too. The most important thing we can do to reverse course is to elect a new governor.

Q: How does your time break down? You're an assemblyman and you have a "real" job as an attorney. How much time do you foresee devoting to party activities?

A: A large majority of my time, now that we are in the summer. The legislative duties will slow down. I expect to be spending the bulk of my time on party duties for the next five months.

Q: How much of your job is going to include raising money?

A: It will be a substantial part of my focus. But there will be other things that we have to prioritize as well. We have a massive grass roots effort to develop and activate. We want to bring new technologies and energize people on the web and on social networking sites. We're going to develop a voter registration drive that we think will be very effective.

Q: Can you make gains in the Assembly? (Democrats now control the Assembly 48 to 32)

A: I think we're going to do very well. We've got good candidates up and down the state. If the top of the ticket runs strong, and I think it will, we do have an outside chance of becoming the majority party in the Assembly.

Q: Kind of a very outside chance, no?

A: Well, it's going to be a challenge. We were in a minority position in 1991, and there was a tidal wave. Poll numbers are telling us that conditions for the Republican party are better now than they were in 1991. (In 1991, Republicans took control of the Assembly and Senate in the wake of \$2.8 billion in new taxes under Gov. Jim Florio).

Q: You voted against the state budget. Spending went down \$3 billion, why are you complaining?

A: The overall level of state spending was the same as it was last year. What we got were one shots and infusions of cash that will not come again ... two and a half billion dollars from Washington. I'm not saying it doesn't have value, what I am saying is that you can't congratulate the Democrats for cutting spending if they just used a different pocket to take the money from. And they still raised taxes by \$2.8 billion.

Q: Where does that number come from?

A: I have to add it up, but when you add in the reduction in the property tax rebate program, it's 900 plus million of that 2.8 billion dollars.

Q: When you were picked for this job, some suggested, our editorial page included, that you might be too ideologically conservative for the position.

A: I think I represent mainstream Republican values. Chris Christie does as well. I sense no hesitation from anybody in our party, no matter their ideological stripe about having me head up the party.

Q: The state has 1.8 million Democrats and 1.1 million Republicans. How do you close the gap?

A: We're going to work hard to register more Republicans in New Jersey. We have a strategy that we are going to roll out this summer to close that registration gap. At the end of the day, I think you have talked to a lot of people, Republicans, Democrats and independents. They want change. There are going to be a lot of Democrats voting for Chris Christie.