

Local candidates fire jabs in Foley fallout  
From the Crain's Chicago Business Newsroom  
October 02 16:42:00, 2006  
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(Crain's) — The political gloves came off here Monday as candidates in the Chicago area's three hotly contested races for Congress scrambled for position in the wake of the resignation of Florida congressman Mark Foley and questions about whether House Speaker Dennis Hastert mishandled the sex scandal.

Reaction specifically ranged from a call to abolish the House ethics committee and replace it with a panel of outside judges to charges that Mr. Hastert, R-Batavia, and other Illinoisans in the GOP leadership failed to protect underage pages in their charge. Meanwhile, in the U.S. Capitol, House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert huddled in his office Monday with Rep. John Shimkus, R-Springfield, who chairs the panel that oversees House pages.

They emerged 15 minutes late for a press conference the speaker's office called to address the issue. His voice quivering, Mr. Hastert read a brief statement, followed by a few words from Mr. Shimkus, and then they walked away from the pack of reporters and cameramen without taking a single question.

In their statements, the two GOP leaders expressed their anger and reiterated that no one in the House GOP hierarchy knew about the salacious content of the communications between the ex-congressman and the former page until shortly before he resigned last Friday.

"Congressman Foley duped a lot of people," Mr. Hastert said. "He lied to Mr. Shimkus and he deceived his instate newspaper when they each questioned him. He deceived the good men and women in organizations around this country, with whom he worked to strengthen our child predator laws. I have known him for all the years he served in this House. He deceived me, too."

"Hastert's public comments reinforce an image of a party under siege," says congressional expert Thomas E. Mann, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington, D.C.

The sharpest talk locally came in the north suburban 10th District, where Democrat Dan Seals accused Republican incumbent Mark Kirk "and the entire Republican leadership" of a "shameful" silence on the scandal.

"They were more concerned about protecting one of their own colleagues in an election year than protecting the teenage boy," Mr. Seals said in a statement.

The statement offered no proof that Mr. Kirk, a deputy GOP whip, had any knowledge of complaints about e-mails sent by Mr. Foley to former and current congressional pages. Messrs. Hastert and Shimkus had some knowledge, but say it was only of what they termed "overly friendly" notes.

Mr. Kirk said in a statement that he is "disgusted" with Mr. Foley, and proposed that House rules be changed to require that any further credible allegation of misconduct with a page be referred to leaders of both major political parties, not just the majority party. Mr. Kirk also called for appointment of a bipartisan outside panel to probe what happened.

In the northwest suburban 10th District, GOP nominee David McSweeney termed Mr. Hastert "a man of integrity," but said the speaker did the right thing in referring the Foley episode to the U.S. Department of Justice.

Mr. McSweeney said the House should abolish its Ethics Committee, which has been paralyzed by partisan discord, in favor of a non-partisan panel of judges. Such a panel "could bring complete impartiality to an issue, and wouldn't involve peers judging each other," he said.

Mr. McSweeney's foe, Democratic incumbent Melissa Bean, said GOP House leadership "failed to act swiftly" when they received early word of Mr. Foley's activities. While the first e-mails may not have been explicit, "How do you know it's not explicit if you don't investigate?" she asked.

In what is believed to be this area's closest race, in the west suburban 6th District, Democrat Tammy Duckworth and Republican Peter Roskam traded barbs on the meaning of the scandal.

Ms. Duckworth charged that House GOP leadership "has been involved in keeping Foley's secret" and called on Mr. Roskam to return the \$40,000 in campaign donations he's received from Messrs. Hastert, Shimkus and other leaders.

Ms. Duckworth also noted that Mr. Roskam's campaign has received heavy donations from the House Republican Campaign Committee, to which Mr. Foley gave \$500,000 over the past decade.

"This is the type of leadership Roskam would look to," Ms. Duckworth

said in a statement. "The last thing we need in Washington is another rubberstamp."

Mr. Roskam's spokesman said the speaker acted correctly in asking an outside agency, the Department of Justice, to probe whether any laws have been broken. That probe will reveal whether Mr. Hastert is at all culpable, the spokesman added.

Voters will decide how to apportion blame, the spokesman said. "The Democrats have had lots of scandals of their own."