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Tar Creek area enters governor's race issue list

By K.E. Sturgeon III
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One candidate for governor says he will make a discussion of cleanup at the Tar Creek Superfund site a priority in his campaign.

"It's a natural issue for me," said Vince Orza, a Democratic candidate for governor. "I don't come from government. That makes me different from my opponents."

Orza is running against Brad Henry and Kelly Haney, both state senators, and Jim Dunegan, a state representative, for the Democratic nomination for governor. Others in the race for governor are Republicans Steve Largent and Jim Denny and independent Gary Richardson.

A 52-year-old Edmond businessman and owner of a chain of restaurants who has twice run for governor as a Republican, Orza said the failure to cleanup the Tar Creek Superfund site is a failure of government.

"That nothing has been done at Tar Creek for more than 20 years, that we've had four or five governors in that time, and they couldn't get anything done, that shows us how stupid government is."

Tar Creek, an abandoned lead mining district, was identified as a Superfund site in 1979.

About \$80 million has been spent by the state and federal government at the site with little progress toward cleanup.

Orza plans to visit the Superfund site Friday with State Rep. Larry Roberts, D-Miami, before attending a dinner sponsored by the Ottawa County Democratic Party at the Miami Civic Center.

Henry, Haney and Dunegan will also be in Miami Friday for the fund-raising dinner, a tribute to Clifton Scott, the retiring state auditor and inspector.

With 18 days left until the Aug. 27 primary, the candidates will be trolling among what pollsters are describing as a vast pool of undecided voters. Some recent polls claim that more than 40 percent of likely Democratic primary voters have not yet made a decision about which candidate will get their vote.

And while other candidates plan to stress traditional Democratic issues like education, teacher pay, health care, jobs, job security and tax reform while in Miami Friday, Orza said he is looking for local issues like the Tar Creek Superfund site to set him apart from his rivals.

"Voters need to hear about this throughout Oklahoma," he said. "I don't think the people of Oklahoma are aware that they have the largest Superfund site in America in the northeast corner of their state. We need a governor who will kick and scream until something is done about Tar Creek."

Pushed matching funds

Haney, of Seminole, who as Senate Appropriations Committee chairman recently pushed for \$4 million in matching funds for Tar Creek, said he will deliver to Ottawa

County Democrats the same message he has recently been delivering in other Oklahoma communities.

“My message is the same for all Oklahomans,” he said. “The key issues that face Oklahomans today are about providing a quality education for all, creating high-skilled, high paying jobs and making access to affordable health care available to everyone.” Haney said his more than two decades of experience in the Legislature sets him apart from the other candidates.

Haney, 61, served in the House from 1981 to 1986 before his election to the Senate, where he has been appropriations chairman since 1994.

I feel with my experience, that I have the ability to move the state where we ought to be and where Oklahomans want it to go,” he said. “Government isn’t managed the way it ought to be managed. I’ve become frustrated with the idea of putting out fires here and there. We do not have a coordinated, comprehensive plan for success.”

Faced similar problems

Dunegan, of Calera in the southeastern part of the state, said Tar Creek reminds him of similar problems in his state representative district.

“We haven’t had anything that big, but we’ve had sand pits that have needed cleaning up,” he said. “We need to realize what this does to a community not just in terms of health problems, but in terms of economic development. Tar Creek stands in the way of development for your community.”

Dunegan, 62, elected six times to the House, portrays himself as a hardworking, honest Democrat with a rural background.

“I look at the ones in the race and I look at the diverse background I have in small business and in the agricultural area and the work I’ve done in public office, that’s what makes me unique,” he said.

Dunegan has served on key committees in the House including Appropriations and Budget Subcommittee on Public Safety, Transportation Committee, Tourism and Recreation Committee and the Higher Education Committee.

Dunegan favors tax cuts, but not revenue cuts. His plan to cut the personal income tax would use money generated from new growth to offset the loss in state money.

Eliminating the state income tax, without raising other taxes, would mean a loss of \$2 billion for the state, which is already struggling to fund current services.

“Everybody is for tax cuts, because that’s what the voters want to hear,” Dunegan said. “I’m for tax cuts, but we’ve got to lay out a plan. It’s sort of difficult to do it without the resources.”

Opposed Rainy Day Funds

Brad Henry, 38, of Shawnee, describes himself as a “fiscal conservative” and opposed dipping into the state’s Rainy Day Fund earlier this year to provide matching funds for Tar Creek cleanup.

He favors elimination of the state income tax on retirement pay, and seeks higher teacher pay and a state lottery to fund education reforms.

His tax plan would cost about \$200 million, but would pay for itself by increasing the state's retirement population and the state's tax base.

The tax break would not apply to investment income, Henry said, but would be aimed at helping the "average retiree."

Henry, whose wife Kim is a teacher, said it is time for Oklahomans to get past an inferiority complex on education.

"We have a great educational system in Oklahoma," he said. "It can be better, but we get a great bang for our buck."

Increasing teacher salaries is vital in the short term, he said.

"If we don't start paying our teachers a competitive salary, in five short years we are going to be in terrible, terrible trouble," Henry said.

He said the state already is facing a shortage of math, science and special education teachers.

Henry said a state lottery needs to be used to provide more funding for education. He said funds raised through the lottery would be used for early childhood education, capital improvements for schools, for education employees' health benefits and to create a college scholarship program.

"This would be a major economic development tool for Oklahoma," he said. "States with the highest per capita incomes also have the highest number of college graduates."