

Petri discusses economy, gas prices

BY BRETT ROWLAND • THE REPORTER BROWLAND@FDLREPORTER.COM • MAY 30, 2008

U.S. Rep. Tom Petri, R-Fond du Lac, isn't expecting to hear from Sen. John McCain anytime soon about that open vice president spot.

The veteran congressman is spending more time thinking about the regional and national economy than being picked to join McCain's presidential campaign.

During a recent conference aimed at helping small businesses get resources and funding from the federal government, Petri took some time to answer a handful of questions from The Reporter. The conference was sponsored by Petri's office.

Petri was first elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1979. He represents Wisconsin's Sixth Congressional District.

Question: What would you say if asked to be John McCain's running mate?

Petri: I haven't given it any thought and I don't think I'll have to.

Question: Who do you think McCain should pick?

Petri: It would be good to have someone who has experience that doesn't overlap with McCain's. Mitt Romney (former Massachusetts governor and presidential hopeful) — he'd be a good selection. Also, Rob Portman (former congressman from Ohio, appointed director of the Office of Management and Budget and later U.S. trade representative by President Bush) is another. He's very effective and younger than McCain, which is a plus.

Question: How many terms do you have left?

Petri: I have no idea.

Question: Can the federal government do anything to lower gasoline prices for consumers?

Petri: There are a number of things the government can do, but there are few, if any, in the "quick fix" category. We've stopped adding to strategic reserves, which were 97 percent full, but that's only one buyer in a global market. There is also talk about cutting down on the number of boutique fuel additives, which have caused prices to spike; that's another thing I've supported. Of course, development of alternative energy sources is the long-term thing. I've also supported making cars more fuel-efficient and making it easier to increase refinery capacity.

Question: Do you think taxing the profits of oil companies will help?

Petri: Raising taxes on big oil companies may feel good from a certain perspective, but it's kind of like kicking the goose that lays the golden egg. However, we do need to make sure that when the price of oil and gasoline go up, it's due to market factors, not price gouging or fixing. That's something you always have to keep an eye on.

Question: What is the federal government doing to reverse downward economic trends?

Petri: Well, for one, we're sitting here at a conference that is designed in part to get people and small businesses in touch with funding opportunities from the government. The economy in our area is mixed. The paper industry is going through hard times. A lot of companies in our area are doing business overseas, but there, the value of the dollar is a double-edged sword. Products are more expensive to produce but cheaper for other countries to afford because of the weakening dollar. ... There are a lot of jobs out there, but the jobs are different than they used to be — most usually have a knowledge or training component.

The Federal Reserve certainly took the lead when the financial markets seized up — it's prevented the housing and mortgage crises from spreading like the banking crises in 1929.

Also, we are debating in Congress trying to do something constructive to help the housing market recover. There is talk of the government helping first-time homebuyers get loans like it did back in the 1970s. The idea is to get the market going again instead of trying to pick winners and losers among the existing mortgages.