

## **McCaskill touts rural upbringing as asset in Senate race**

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HOUSTON, Mo. - State Auditor Claire McCaskill launched her Democratic bid for the U.S. Senate on Tuesday by focusing, in part, on what she lacked.

"I think it's a very good thing that I don't have experience in Washington," McCaskill said, alluding to the 12 years that incumbent Republican Jim Talent has spent in the nation's capital, either as a member of Congress or as a lobbyist.

She asserted that her rural upbringing and her two-decade involvement in state government made her better suited to fight for the state's interests.

"I will come with independence and a fresh perspective," McCaskill said, standing in front of the McCaskill and Son feed mill that her family once owned in the midst of Houston, in Texas County in south-central Missouri.

She accused Talent of being part of a national Republican leadership "that has forgotten the real problems that people in Houston face."

Said McCaskill: "Washington has lost it. They've lost good old-fashioned Missouri common sense."

In most cases, she said, Talent has either supported the national and state Republican leadership or stood by while decisions have been made that harmed the state and its people.

As examples, she cited:

The new federal energy package, which she said contained \$14 billion in giveaways to the oil companies at a time when they're raking in record profits and contributing to higher gas prices.

The Bush administration's push for "a scheme to privatize the most solemn promise in our society - Social Security."

Medicaid cuts affecting disabled and handicapped people and children with special needs. Although it is the state government that is trimming 900,000 people from Medicaid, the result is returning \$700 million from Missouri's share of federal Medicaid matching money, she said.

If Talent were a true leader, she asserted, he'd have recommended against some of the cuts.

McCaskill also accused Talent of doing little to block last week's recommendations by a federal commission to strip Missouri of about 3,000 military-related jobs, most of them in St. Louis.

McCaskill was more careful when it came to the war in Iraq, saying she wasn't privy to the information Congress had when it approved the military action. But she noted, "We don't have a clear plan for peace."

Missouri's Republican members of Congress struck back by issuing a joint statement that repeatedly touted Talent as "an effective and experienced voice for Missouri."

Fellow Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond cited Talent's work to curb methamphetamine production in the state, to promote renewable fuels that use farm crops and to protect safe water.

Rural Missourians once automatically backed Democrats and now overwhelmingly support Republicans. Last fall, their ballots made the difference in the statewide contests, including McCaskill's loss to Blunt in the battle for governor.

In the past two decades, Houston has lost two factories, one producing jeans and one making shoes, that used to employ close to 1,000 people. The old McCaskill and Son feed store is now used as a warehouse and a taxidermy shop.

"This is kind of a depressed area," said barber Steve Drake, who now owns the old McCaskill building and agreed to allow the state auditor to hold her kickoff event on the front steps.

Drake said he was concerned about the region's economic problems, but that doesn't mean McCaskill can count on his vote. "The two most important issues for me are gun rights and pro-life," he said.

After hearing her after-speech comment that she supports abortion rights, Drake said he probably wouldn't support her.

Nodding in agreement nearby was Carlos Elmore, 80, a World War II veteran who used to operate an auto repair shop.

"I don't believe in murder, and I don't believe in homosexuals," Elmore said.

Elmore added that he was becoming increasingly upset with Republicans, as he's read about the Missouri resurgence of the Log Cabin Republicans, a gay group. He said he was going to be paying close attention to what the Senate candidates say about such social issues.

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