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The Detroit News ▶ E-mail this story ▶ Comment on this story

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SITE INDEX

Homepage
 Search
 CyberSurveys
 ▶ News Talk
 ▶ Sports Talk
 ▶ Lions Talk
 ▶ Wings Talk
 ▶ Car Talk
 ▶ Tech Talk
 Horoscope
 Hot Sites
 Lottery
 Weather
 Staff

NEWS

Autos
 ▶ Auto Show
 ▶ Joyrides
 Business
 Careers
 Columnists
 Commuting
 Detroit History
 Editorials
 Health
 Metro / State
 ▶ Livingston
 ▶ Macomb
 ▶ Oakland
 ▶ Wayne
 ▶ On Detroit
 Nation / World
 Obituaries
 ▶ Death Notices
 Politics / Govt.
 Real Estate
 Religion
 Schools
 Special Reports
 Technology

SPORTS

Sports Home
 ▶ Lions/NFL
 ▶ Red Wings/NHL
 ▶ Pistons/NBA
 ▶ Shock/WNBA
 ▶ Tigers/Baseball
 ▶ MSU
 ▶ U-M
 More Colleges
 Golf
 High Schools
 Motor Sports
 More Sports
 Scoreboards

ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment
 ▶ Casino Guide
 ▶ Movie Finder
 ▶ TV Listings



By George Weeks / The Detroit News

Stabenow sees federal role in Great Lakes

Fair or not, a rap on former U.S. Sen. Spencer Abraham, R-Mich., was that he was slow to tend to party and other fences in outstate Michigan. The Lansing Democrat who defeated him was quick to span outstate's farthest reaches.

Debbie Stabenow, in her first extended travel as Michigan's junior senator, spent last week taking soundings in the Upper Peninsula from Houghton to Sault Ste. Marie, and in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula from Traverse City to Alpena.

What did she hear?

"I've been hearing about environmental concerns all around this trip," Stabenow said in an interview. "There is a particular concern about the Great Lakes."

The concern, she said, centers on two issues: sale or diversion of Great Lakes water; and slant or directional drilling from the shore for oil and gas under the lakes.

Both issues have sparked disputes between Gov. John Engler and Democrats in Michigan's congressional delegation.

On diversion, Engler's emphasis is on developing standards and regulation through Great Lakes states and provinces. Democrats want greater federal involvement. They also oppose drilling, which Engler would allow with restrictions.

(In a statewide poll of Michigan voters released Friday by Lansing-based EPIC/MRA, respondents said they opposed such drilling by 59-30 percent after hearing arguments for and against.)

Crossword
Features
Food
Homestyle
Wine Report

PHOTOS

Sports
Red Wings
Autos
Joyrides
News
History

Stabenow said “there is a real concern about the diversion every place we have gone. Diversion and drilling, both. But water diversion is No. 1. Everywhere, people have been raising that as an issue.”

She said, “we have to get beyond this argument of whether this is a state or federal concern. It is both. The states have an absolutely critical front-line role. But when you’re dealing with Canada, the federal government has to be involved.

“It is international. It is not enough just to have the Great Lakes states. So I worry, when I think the governor really wanted to make this about state-versus-federal, or that the Republicans in the state trying to make it a political issue. That is not in our best interest as a state.”

2002 governor’s race

Stabenow says “my guess” is that a consensus candidate will emerge for the Democratic nomination “in the end.”

The end is not in sight, and spirited competition is building. Party power centers appear early to be divided between Atty. Gen. Jennifer Granholm and U.S. Rep. David Bonior. Ex-Gov. Jim Blanchard is out and about among grass-roots activists — and beaming about early polls.

EPIC/MRA’s Feb. 18-22 survey on how Democrats “lean” had 41 percent tilted toward Blanchard. Others: Granholm, 27 percent; Bonior, 16; Sen. Gary Peters, 2; and Sen. Alma Wheeler Smith, less than 1.

Stabenow said of the field: “Jennifer, obviously, it would be wonderful to see her running. Dave Bonior is a very dear friend of mine. (Peters. Smith, Blanchard are) all people I have worked with over the years — I respect.”

EPIC/MRA’s poll last week of likely general election voters had Blanchard and Granholm beating Lt. Gov. Dick Posthumus, and Bonior in a virtual tie with Posthumus.

Although Posthumus is the presumed front-runner for the GOP nomination, there are stirrings in the party about looking at alternatives.

U.S. Rep. Peter Hoekstra, R-Holland, said there is some interest among Republicans in “new blood” and an openness to take a look at other names. He said there are “people who just don’t want to hand Dick the throne.”

Is it Engler fatigue? Concern that Posthumus can’t win?

Whatever it is, Hoekstra sees “a vigorous debate after 12 years (of Engler) — a struggle for the heart and soul of the Republican Party.”

Could it be that both parties will have spirited primaries?

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[▶ Previous story](#) [▶ Back to index](#) [▶ Next story](#)