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# The Star-Ledger

## Sabrin says he would reach out to Cuba

**Debating Pennacchio, Senate hopeful asserts sanctions don't work**

Sunday, March 16, 2008

BY ROBERT SCHWANEBERG

**Star-Ledger Staff**

U.S. Senate hopeful Murray Sabrin said yesterday that, if elected, he would work to normalize trade and diplomatic relations with Cuba. His rival for the Republican nomination, Sen. Joseph Pennacchio (R-Morris), insisted Cuba must first free political prisoners and respect human rights.

Pennacchio said he favors limited school choice for failing urban schools. Sabrin said he would go much further and give tax credits to all parents with children in nonpublic elementary or high schools.

Those key differences between the two candidates emerged during a fast-paced, hour-long debate that ended with Sabrin winning the endorsement of the Gloucester County Republican organization. Its convention in Sewell, which was open to all registered Republicans in the county, gave 86 votes to Sabrin to 56 for Pennacchio.

It was the first county endorsement won by Sabrin, a professor at Ramapo College, and it gave him the coveted party line in Gloucester for the June 3 primary. Pennacchio had won the GOP conventions in Bergen County -- Sabrin's home turf -- as well as Hunterdon and Union counties.

The winner of the Republican nomination will face U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) in the fall.

Pennacchio, a dentist from Montville, moved up to the state Senate in January after serving in the Assembly since 2000. Sabrin, who lives in Fort Lee, unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate in 2000 and lost a race for governor as the Libertarian candidate in 1997.

During yesterday's debate at the Sewell Volunteer Fire Department's banquet hall, Sabrin said, "If I'm nominated, I will go to Cuba" to begin a dialogue aimed at fostering freedom and ending the trade embargo.

"Sanctions don't work," Sabrin said. "I don't believe governments should punish the innocent people of other nations."

Even during "the height of the cold war," Sabrin said, the United States continued to trade with the former Soviet Union.

"It would be hypocritical for us not to trade with Cuba when we were trading with the evil empire," Sabrin said, using former President Ronald Reagan's term for the Soviet Union.

Pennacchio said he favors dialogue with Cuba, but said it must be tied to that nation's progress on respecting human rights.

"It's as much about policy in Cuba changing as the United States changing," Pennacchio said, adding that Cuba still holds political prisoners. If the United States tolerates such human rights violations "90 miles off our coast," Pennacchio said, "who knows what other countries further away will do?"

On government support for nonpublic schools, Sabrin said, "Parents should have choice." Just as parents with children in college already get tax credits, he said, those with children in nonpublic schools, kindergarten through high school, should also get tax credits.

"You shouldn't have to pay taxes and tuition," Sabrin said.

Pennacchio, who proudly declared himself "a product of public education," said he would not go that far.

"There are instances where I will support school choice," Pennacchio said, citing failing schools in urban areas. But given limited education funding, he said, a choice system that extends to suburbs with thriving public schools is "ultimately going to end up hurting the public school system."

On other issues, they had differences in emphasis more than outright disagreements. Both favored lower taxes. Both said they oppose free social services for illegal immigrants. Sabrin, who had the last word on that question, said citizenship should no longer be automatically granted to every child born in the United States.

He said he foresees "a major humanitarian crisis" when babies of non-U.S. citizens are born in America "but their parents are deported for one reason or another." Born in Germany, Sabrin said his family came to the United States and built a life here "by following the rules."

Asked what sort of federal judges should be appointed, Pennacchio said they must "interpret the law, not make it up as they go along."

Sabrin used the question to obliquely criticize the GOP presidential nominee, Sen. John

McCain (R-Ariz.), whose name is on a law restricting campaign contributions. Sabrin called that law "an abomination," adding, "I will make sure free speech is the law of the land."

*Robert Schwaneberg may be reached at [rschwaneberg@starledger.com](mailto:rschwaneberg@starledger.com) or (609) 989-0324.*

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