

Kitchens, primary challenger Swagel split on tightening 1849 abortion ban

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Rep. Joel Kitchens and his 1st Assembly District primary challenger Milt Swagel are split over whether to add exceptions to Wisconsin's 1849 abortion ban and what to do with the state's surplus.

In interviews with WisPolitics.com both said they are "pro-life" and feel there should be restrictions to abortion access, but Kewaunee County Supv. Swagel, 60, said he wants less access than the 173-year-old law allows. Meanwhile, Kitchens wants to add exceptions for rape and incest.

The district covers much of the state's eastern Door Peninsula, including all of Door County, Kewaunee County, and portions of Brown County and Manitowoc County. Kitchens has represented the district since 2015.

The state's existing ban makes providing an abortion a felony. And while legal experts disagree if newer abortion laws take precedent, abortion providers in Wisconsin have stopped performing the procedures.

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"Abortion is totally wrong," Swagel, of the city of Kewaunee said. "The exemption for the life of the mother should be removed too because all viable pregnancies should be carried to term. The unborn child is totally innocent."

The only valid exception he sees is for ectopic pregnancies, which he says have little chance of producing a child.

Kitchens, R-Sturgeon Bay, said he wants to add exceptions to the ban in cases of rape or incest, and he supports the existing exception in cases where the life of the mother is at risk.

"I've always said that I've been pro-life, but I'm in favor of those exceptions," the 64-year-old said.

Kitchens also said he would hold off on returning the state's \$3.8 billion budget surplus to taxpayers until the next budget cycle. Education and transportation are areas he says could use additional investment, especially after the pandemic.

"We asked the schools to take advantage of their relief money that we got from the federal government last time, so we know that there's that financial cliff they're going to face if we don't put more in this time," he said.

But Swagel said he wants to return that money to taxpayers now.

"Return it to the taxpayers, it's their money," he said.

Both said the state's gas tax should not be lifted as the country experiences higher than normal gas prices.

Kitchens said suspending the tax would have little impact on how much consumers pay at the pump.

"I just think that would be really short-sighted," he said. "Every time the price goes up on gas we can't have that be our go-to method of dealing with it."

Swagel said revenue generated by the tax is necessary to fund maintenance and improvement projects for roads and bridges.

They also agreed it's too late to rescind Wisconsin's 10 electoral college votes from the 2020 election, adding the GOP should be looking forward, not backward. Kitchens said there were problems with the election he wants to see fixed, but didn't specify.

Swagel went further, saying, "I do believe there was fraud."

Kitchens said he wants to focus much of his time on ensuring parents and kids have access to quality private and public education, while engaging parents more in their children's curriculum.

Swagel noted one of his top issues is access to clean drinking water, which he called "essential for everyone."