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(S.D.)-Latest Election News From Around The State



By: Roxie Graham-Marski Posted at: 11/07/2012 10:35 AM

*Photo: Rep. Kristi Noem and challenger Matthew Varilek*

GOP's Noem wins 2nd term as lone SD House member

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) - Republican Rep. Kristi Noem has defeated Democratic challenger Matt Varilek to win a second term as South Dakota's lone member of the U.S. House.

Varilek is a former member of Democratic Sen. Tim Johnson's staff. He argued throughout the campaign that Noem had shirked her duties by skipping committee meetings and failed to protect South Dakota's interests in getting a farm bill passed before Congress adjourned before the election.

Noem is 40-year-old rancher and former state lawmaker from Castlewood who was first elected to Congress as part of the 2010 Republican wave. She says she has worked to cut federal spending and taxes, has a 99 percent voting record in committees and did all she could to get a farm bill passed.

Republicans maintain majority in SD Legislature

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) - Republicans have squashed Democrats' efforts to significantly close the party gap in the South Dakota Legislature and will maintain control come January.

With 78 races called, the GOP will have at least 22 seats in the Senate and 38 in the House.

The GOP started with an advantage, fielding candidates for more seats than Democrats did.

Republicans ran candidates for 33 of the 35 Senate seats, while Democrats had candidates for just 24.

The GOP also had candidates for 62 of 70 House seats, while Democrats had candidates for only 51.

The last time Democrats controlled a South Dakota legislative chamber was during the two-year term after the 1992 election, when they won 20 seats in the Senate. Republicans had 15.

**GOP retains control of S. Dakota utilities panel**

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) - Republicans Chris Nelson and Kristie Fiegen (FEE'-gihn) have kept their seats on the South Dakota Public Utilities Commission, meaning that the GOP has all three seats on the panel.

The 50-year-old Fiegen defeated Democratic challenger Matt McGovern for a six-year term on the commission that regulates grain warehouses and natural gas, electric and telephone utilities. Commission Chairman Chris Nelson defeated challenger Nick Nemecek, a farmer and former state lawmaker, for a four-year term.

The 48-year-old Nelson is a former secretary of state who, like Fiegen, was appointed about two years ago to fill a vacancy on the PUC.

Democrats had criticized the commission for not doing enough to protect farmers and keep utilities costs low. Republicans countered that they have protected farmers the best they could under current law.

**SD voters approve balanced budget amendment**

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) - South Dakota voters have approved a state constitutional amendment to require a balanced budget.

Republican Gov. Dennis Daugaard proposed the amendment earlier this year, saying current language implies the budget must be balanced but doesn't require it.

Two provisions limit state debt and provide for an emergency tax to wipe out any deficit.

The amendment Daugaard proposed says the governor must propose - and the Legislature must pass - a budget in which spending does not exceed anticipated revenue.

Opponents say the amendment is not needed and could encourage overly optimistic revenue estimates that lead to deficits.

SD voters reject plan for grants to big projects

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) - South Dakota voters have rejected Gov. Dennis Daugaard's plan to give incentive grants to large construction projects.

The Republican-controlled Legislature passed a bill last year at the governor's urging to provide grants to companies to get them to expand or relocate to South Dakota.

The state Democratic party, however, said the estimated \$16 million a year in grants would be better used to help fund schools. It gathered enough signatures to put the measure on the ballot for a public vote.

The grants would have been paid for with 22 percent of the receipts from the contractor's excise tax.

South Dakota for years has had a program that refunds construction taxes for large industrial projects, but it expires at the end of this year.

SD voters reject sales hike for schools, Medicaid

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) - South Dakota voters have rejected a proposal to raise the state sales tax to provide more money for schools and the Medicaid program that provides health care to low-income people.

A teachers union and a health care organization collected signatures to put the proposal on the ballot after Gov. Dennis Daugaard and the Republican-dominated Legislature cut state funding last year for school districts and medical facilities that serve Medicaid patients.

The measure would have raised the state sales tax from 4 percent to 5 percent and was expected to raise an estimated \$180 million a year. Half would have gone to school districts and half to Medicaid.

Opponents say such funding decisions should be left to the governor and the Legislature.

South Dakota voters reject teacher merit-pay plan

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) - South Dakota voters have rejected Gov. Dennis Daugaard's plan to give bonuses to top teachers, phase out tenure and recruit candidates for critical teaching jobs.

The Legislature approved the Republican governor's proposal earlier this year, but the state's main teachers union, the South Dakota Education Association, collected enough signatures to put the measure on the ballot for a public vote.

Daugaard argues the measure will improve student achievement. But opponents contend it could hurt the quality of education because teachers might stop collaborating to help students as they compete for bonus money.

The plan would have given annual \$5,000 bonuses to the top 20 percent of teachers in each school district and provided scholarships and bonuses to recruit teachers in critical fields.