

## Leatherwood talks tough in Blackburn stronghold

### Faces loyal GOP women's group

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CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. -- Campaigning in a stronghold of his Republican primary opponent Tuesday, Shelby County Register Tom Leatherwood quickly faced the inevitable question: "I've been pleased with Marsha Blackburn. Why should I vote for you?"

Minutes earlier, Leatherwood had raised the point himself, more gingerly -- telling the 50 Montgomery County Republican Women at their monthly luncheon that it's "nothing personal" against Blackburn, the 7th District's Republican congresswoman he's challenging for a fourth term. He had served two years with her in the state Senate and supported her congressional campaign in 2004.

"But I became disappointed with the Republican majority we had, that we worked so hard to get in place. They squandered the opportunity," he said. "They talked the talk but they stopped walking the walk, and we were turned out of office in 2006. Unfortunately, in my view -- and some may disagree -- the incumbent was part of the problem."

During the question and answer period, Demetra Boyd pressed Leatherwood further: "Tell us why you are running against her and why we should vote for you."

He pulled off the gloves, condemning Blackburn for opposing a State Children's Health Insurance Program expansion that he said would have helped the Regional Medical Center at Memphis but voting for a "\$300,000 earmark for the Houston zoo," for "funneling over \$300,000" in campaign funds to her daughter and son-in-law, and for some 20 trips, paid for by special interests, that he said she and her congressional staffers took over six years.

Blackburn and Leatherwood, who square off in the Aug. 5 Republican primary, are competing across the sprawling 15-county district that goes from East Memphis to Clarksville.

Montgomery County is Blackburn territory -- the Republican women made that clear --

and Leatherwood was an unknown figure.

But the women (and three men) laughed at the Arlington resident's campaign jokes and nodded support for his positions on curbing illegal immigration and the need to match spending cuts with tax cuts.

"She's very popular," Boyd said afterward.

And she, like most of the women there, knows Blackburn personally. "He didn't say anything to make me not support her."

Elfie Marshal said Leatherwood "made a good case. There were a lot of tough questions. You could tell his answers came from his heart and from his beliefs. It's true that the Republican Party has lost its way and one of the reasons why the Democrats have cashed in. I think he would have a chance if he gets his message out." She said she'll decide who to support after further research.

Leatherwood said he has never paid any family members from campaign funds and has never taken trips paid for by interest groups, although he had plenty of chances on the state Senate Finance Committee. He said general election voters will hold the GOP accountable if the party doesn't hold its own members accountable in the primary.

"When I got involved in the campaign, The Commercial Appeal had reported she had paid family members -- her daughter and son-in-law -- over \$120,000 in campaign and (political action committee) money. But one of the watchdog ethics groups up there said no, it's actually over \$300,000.

"Frankly, I think they're ethical breaches that Republicans ought to be above. And if we had been above them, Tom Delay, her mentor, wouldn't have had to resign. She's done many of the things: Tom Delay had family on the payroll. Special interest trips. Trouble shifting money around. That district ended up flipping from Republican to Democrat.

"Frankly I believe -- you can disagree -- she has too much baggage to represent us going into November."

Blackburn campaign spokeswoman Darcy Anderson said Leatherwood "has been misinforming people" when he talks about "family members. The only family member on her campaign is (her daughter) Mary Morgan (Ketchel), on her finance team. If Mary Morgan does not raise money, she does not make money. She makes 10 percent. That's the average any other fundraiser would make. Her (Blackburn's) husband does not get paid. Her son does not get paid.

"That's all he's been running on," Anderson said.

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