

# GOLDEN: Ideas competing in GOP primary

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(Photo: File photo)

Because primary elections are party controlled and the winner in most cases is the candidate with the strongest organization and the most money, it is both surprising and refreshing to see the two leading Republican contenders engage in an actual policy debate over the most contentious of issues — property tax relief and school funding.

Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and her closest but fairly distant rival, Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, R-Somerset, released their proposals within days of one another, sparking a war of dueling news releases over whose ideas were more credible.

It is significant that both felt the need to offer tax relief programs in some detail, rather than follow past practice of speaking in general terms about the increasing burden on homeowners and the need to do something about it.

Guadagno, holding a comfortable and consistent lead in the early polling, recommended capping property taxes to support local education at 5 percent of household income, saving an average of nearly \$900 a year and as much as \$3,000 in some districts. She also wants to eliminate overfunding some districts and reallocate the aid to those districts who've been denied their fair share.

She conceded her plan would cost the state \$1.5 billion, but expressed confidence that economic growth, an intense audit of government functions and other reforms would be sufficient to cover the cost.

Ciattarelli also relies on eliminating the overfunding problem in the current aid formula, along with a series of adjustments and reforms that he contends will instill greater fairness in the way property taxes are levied and result in reductions.

He also affirmed support for municipal consolidation as an element in property tax reductions — an idea that has become a staple in campaigns over the years but is a classic example of hope over experience.

Encouraging or providing incentives for consolidations has never fulfilled what its proponents have promoted. There's been a singular lack of voluntary municipal mergers, primarily because local governments are not convinced that significant property tax savings will result and — quite frankly — because local residents fiercely value their autonomy and independence and are loathe to surrender it for a negligible and illusory tax savings.

Unless Ciattarelli is willing to recommend that the state mandate such consolidations, it's simply a recycled idea whose time has never really come.

His campaign criticized Guadagno for proposing a program whose cost the state cannot afford and for unrealistic expectations that economic growth and spending cuts will cover the additional cost.

With a substantial lead in the polls, a majority of county party endorsements and the valuable county ballot line accompanying those endorsements, Guadagno could have opted to rely on the organizational strength to carry her through the next six weeks to primary day rather than engage Ciattarelli directly over the property tax issue. Simply running out the clock while talking in general terms was probably a tempting and quite possibly successful strategy.

Diving into an issues debate, though, has also served to advance her image as an independent candidate with her own ideas and vision separate from the Christie administration. Distancing herself from an administration of which she's been a part since January 2010 has been a delicate and tricky task for her, but she's displayed a measure of surefootedness in carrying it off.

Her property tax relief program, by signaling she'd do things differently and with greater effectiveness than Christie, was a move to assert her independence and shed some of the baggage carried by her association with the administration.

Ciattarelli, though trailing by double digits, has mounted a vigorous campaign, unencumbered by a need to stand by Christie or feel compelled to support the administration. He's qualified for public funds and has won the support of seven county organizations, including several with strong Republican histories. While Guadagno remains the frontrunner, a glance into her rearview mirror shows Ciattarelli holding his position.

There was nothing to lose for him to offer a property tax relief program and doing so was designed in large measure to put pressure on Guadagno to do the same. Whether it will gain sufficient ground to overcome the lieutenant governor's edge in organizational support remains to be seen.

Primary contests are seldom decided on the basis of policy debates, strength of ideas or insightful grasp of issues. Party politics and the ability of county leaders to turn out the troops on election day matter more.

It is, though, a welcome turn of events when competing ideas command at least a part of the stage.

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