

Presentation Clark Hourly Wage Retirees' Luncheon

August 6, 2008

It's an honor to be here this afternoon and I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. As you know, I am running for the Democratic candidate to become the next state representative for the 78th District, which includes the southern part of Berrien, Dowagiac and Howard Township. For more than two years, I have been having conversations throughout the district with people in coffee shops, at the grocery stores, on the streets. I must tell you that I heard far too many more stories of failure, decline and fear:

- People who were one paycheck away from financial disaster because of lay offs, factory closings and jobs gone overseas;
- Families with small children among the growing ranks of those who lack health insurance or whose insurance is so limited that it only kicks in for catastrophic situations;
- Older couples unable to afford rising property taxes with fears of foreclosures – foreclosures which when combined with other people are at an all time high in the 78th District with almost 500 homes in the process.
- Workers who earned a right to a reasonable pension being forced to depend more and more on social security as the major portion of their family income.

People I talked with then and continue to talk with today are deeply worried about the economy and their survival. They are frightened about jobs leaving our communities, about rising costs at the gas pump and the grocery store with stagnant incomes and about their inability to access adequate health care for themselves and their children. Sadly, many will never know the collective success over sixty years of a strong and growing middle class, built by people like you that allowed most of us to experience the 'American Dream.' And that is exactly why I decided to run: When at least one in four of us today can no longer participate in that way of life and the very essence of our middle class is disappearing, **we need change and we need it now.** People feel overtaxed, overburdened and overstressed. I feel and see the disparity between the haves and have-nots, which is growing, not diminishing as once hoped. I feel and see our middle class losing out more and more to those who care only about taking care of their own through tax cuts for the wealthy.

So, why is this election so important? Here's why:

- Because it is you who built this community through hard work, taxes and integrity and it is you who are now being short-changed.
- Because it is you who spent years working toward a secure retirement with health benefits and now may find the need to supplement your income or make choices between groceries and drug prescriptions.
- Because it is you who raised your families on "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work" and now find that those earned benefits are being whittled away because of broken promises for the sake of "bottom-line" profits.

That's why this election is so important. That's why now is the best chance you will have to make a change.

- I am asking for your vote to send me to Lansing to be your champion, your voice, your advocate.
- I am asking for the vote of your neighbors, friends and families so they will send me to Lansing as someone who is committed to working families and the right to freely organize.
- I am asking for all citizens to get out and vote on election day or cast absentee ballots so that I can go to Lansing to carry out YOUR agenda, not that of special interests.

We have only to look at the rise and decline of the Clark Equipment Company to know why this is important.

We all know about the birth and rebirth of Clark Equipment as an industrial giant and the center of innovation in the utility vehicle and highway trailer business. George Rich, JR Burrow, Eugene Clark – all characters and all innovators – used their great talents to move the business ahead and to transition to higher levels of development. But, we also know that their success did not come about solely because of them. The truth is the company's success would never have been realized were it not for the men and women like you working on the factory floor in assembly lines. You brought productivity to its highest levels and produced the finest products with the least possible number of defects. In return, you were guaranteed financial security that allowed you to take care of your families, give back to the community and build toward a secure retirement to enjoy in later years. All of this only to be defeated by the company moving production off shore for lower wage rates, less environmental regulation and working conditions not seen in this country in over four decades.

So I say again, why is this election so important? Here's why.

In their recent debates, the Republican candidates for state representative to a person, declared themselves to be advocates of "Right to Work" here in Michigan. We all know that "Right to Work" laws are **wrong for Michigan**. They won't stop jobs from disappearing nor revitalize our communities to their former levels of prosperity. These are candidates who run on tickets of fear and division and, more than not, dictated by private powerful interests. These are candidates who attack organized labor as an enemy - the very people who brought us the eight-hour day, the 40 hour week, paid overtime, worker safety laws, child labor laws, health care, pensions, vacation time, and countless other benefits. These are the standards enjoyed by millions of Americans in today's workforce, unionized or not.

You and I know that if we are to bring Michigan back to a level of success, it will be unions leading the way through their quality apprenticeship programs and workplace standards. That is why I am committed to using my voice to help defeat Right to Work here in Michigan and to advocate for the federal Employee Free Choice Act, now stalled in the U.S. Senate. I also stand fully behind an aggressive policy of making sure that all construction and building contracts strictly enforce the living and prevailing wage regulations put into place by state and federal laws. When I go to Lansing, you can bet I will keep contractors and public entities on their toes so that they can't avoid these requirements through out of state dealings. Let there be little doubt

in your mind that this election is the best chance you will have for change. Jobs are still leaving, promises still being broken. In the past few weeks alone,

- we have seen a major non-union tool and die company close in Northern Berrien County costing 150 jobs;
- We have watched the continued Bosch layoff process of UAW union members, now with 70 more joining the ranks of more than a 1,000 workers booted out over the past few years.
- Even those workers with negotiated contracts are getting the short-end of the stick. Just look at American Axle where workers returned with a less than satisfying contract that doesn't come close to matching the great productivity of their work. Rather than lauding the benefits of "prevailing wages," management is chanting the "bottom line" cheer.

Here's an example of what I mean. Have you seen where the incumbent up north (John Proos) has been praised for a scheme that would increase profits of oil companies but take a decade or more to see relief at the gas pump? Will someone please explain to me why oil company CEOs should be rewarded with greater and greater annual income packages and untaxed stock options while workers and retirees continue to fall behind the economic survival line? It is just not right and as your state representative you can bet I will fight to change that!

Speaking about relief at the gas pump . . .

How about relief for seniors so that they don't need to sit up nights worrying about whether or not the burden of their care will fall to their children or some stranger in a nursing home? Did you know that every hour over ten Michigan residents turn 60 years of age? Population projections indicate that those in our age category and above will grow by over one million persons in the next 22 years. We are an important force to be dealt with.

- That is why retirees like you or those nearing retirement who went to work every day and played by the rules should not be required to make choices that diminish their resources, independence or standing in the community.
- They should not be forced to leave their homes and places of comfort to move to a nursing facility when there is no real physical or social need to do so.
- They should not be forced into situations where they lose pride or status as a result of insensitive and penny-wise, pound foolish, "one size fits all" government solutions.

Yet, here we are fighting a losing battle against conservative elements in the state legislature that would deny you meaningful choices and person-centered solutions through the MI Choice program. This program would allow the Medicaid long term care benefit to follow you to a setting of your choice, including your own home, a nursing home, home for the aged, or adult foster care. It is a concept that has been tested, approved by the Federal government and in place in 40 other states and one that I am committed to supporting. It is a revenue neutral strategy in which the investment made is equal to the savings realized. Currently, Michigan spends a smaller percentage of its Medicaid budget on long-term care compared with other states. I believe that with our ever increasing older population we must close this gap by increasing the commitment of state funds to match federal dollars so that we can expand and enhance MI

Choice and Home Help services, and to support quality improvement initiatives for nursing home care, where such service is necessary.

Now before I end, I would tell you about two recent important events that impacted all of us. Recently, thousands of older Michigianians went to Lansing to talk to their legislators about this and other programs beneficial to senior citizens. None of the actions discussed would cost citizens any tax dollars and might even save dollars. Our County's incumbents from the House appeared on the east lawn of the capital with these individuals and assured them that they "were with us" on the MI Choice. They even went so far as to bring a resolution to the floor honoring older Michigianians. What is the status of this program today? It went down to defeat in part thanks to both our Berrien County state representatives because of the heavy duty lobbying by the nursing home industry.

Here's another frightening story.

Recently Michigan Blue Cross/Blue Shield pushed through the House by an overwhelming margin a bill that would, among other things, allow insurers to re-underwrite policies for consumers who get sick, require senior citizens to fill out intrusive health questionnaires, strip away pre-existing condition safeguards and raise rates an average of 15 percent in the State of Michigan. Here is a non-profit organization receiving all the tax-exempt benefits, licensed by the state to service citizens working not on our behalf but on that of special interests. The frightening and despicable part of this whole thing is who can you really trust?

Time does not permit me to talk more about the many other issues that seniors need to be sensitive to like preservation of Social Security, reform of corporate bankruptcy laws to protect retirees, elimination of income tax on seniors making less than \$50,000, age discrimination, elder abuse and on and on. But I want you to know that I will examine any decision regarding our senior population under the microscope of local needs and issues in order to make them relevant to you and all others. You can be sure that I will always put your interests ahead of special interests. I will work to help to grow our economy by putting my trust in organized labor and the people who fought for many of the benefits we as Americans have come to cherish and depend on. I won't say one thing on the lawn of the Capital and do another on the floor of the House. I will walk across that center line in the State House to link up with members of the opposite party and knock on any office door to make compromises and alliances, Republican or Democrat, who can be trusted to keep his or her word for the benefit of you here at home and others throughout our region and state. I will leave no stone unturned and will never fail to shake a hand if it can help make a difference for you.

This is our best chance for change and I hope I can count on your vote. Stand with me now, stand with me throughout this campaign, and stand with me on Election Day! Together we will work to get results in Lansing that bring back prosperity to Southwest MI and the wonderful people like you living here.

Bless you all and bless our great state and this wonderful Gateway to Michigan. Thank you.