

While predicting Varilek win, Johnson remains mum on his own political future

By David Lias

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Sen. Tim Johnson said Thursday, May 31 that he believes Matt Varilek will be successful in the upcoming June 5 Democratic U.S. House primary election and will run a winning campaign against incumbent Rep. Kristi Noem (R) this fall.

The first half of the senator's prediction came true Tuesday.

"He will do very well," Johnson said of Varilek, who was a member of the senator's staff before announcing his U.S. House candidacy. "He has yet to get through his primary, which is coming up next week, but I think Matt will do very well. And his race opposed to Kristi Noem ... it will be close.

"Tom Daschle and George McGovern and I have endorsed Matt Varilek," he said. "He is a good guy, and he will be an outstanding Congressman."

Varilek won the Democratic nomination for South Dakota's lone U.S. House seat on Tuesday, sending him into what was expected to be an uphill fall battle against Republican Congresswoman Kristi Noem.

Varilek defeated Minnehaha County Commissioner Jeff Barth in a Democratic primary in which the candidates rarely mentioned each other. Instead, they targeted Noem for her votes on budget and tax issues and allegations that she missed a lot of House Agriculture Committee meetings.

However, Noem could be a formidable opponent in November because Republicans far outnumber Democrats in South Dakota and she has raised at least five times more than the two Democratic hopefuls combined.

Varilek said his campaign would go back to work Wednesday morning in an effort to defeat Noem. He said he would focus on her votes on issues such as Medicare and try to cast her as a leader in a dysfunctional Congress.

"It's never easy to knock off an incumbent," Varilek said. "I think we have a great opportunity, given that dismal record."

Noem said she's proud of her record and hopes the general election campaign will focus on issues that matter to South Dakotans.

"I am running for re-

election to continue fighting for fiscal responsibility, to work towards replacing the presidents' health care law with an approach that gives patients more control and Washington less control, and to keep up the fight to stop Washington's war on the family farm," Noem said in a written statement.

Barth called Varilek to concede the primary and congratulate him.

"I gave him some shots and he kept on going. I think he will do a good job in the fall," Barth said.

The Democratic candidates, both of whom are residents of the state's largest city of Sioux Falls, took different approaches in their campaigns.

Varilek, 37, touted working his way through several colleges before spending nearly seven years working for Johnson, the last five in South Dakota as the senator's economic development director. He said that experience allowed him to "get to know the communities, and also learn from Sen. Johnson how to do the job effectively."

JOHNSON STILL UNDECIDED

Johnson met with local media in the lobby of the new Beacom Hall of the USD Beacom School of Business on the University of South Dakota campus in Vermillion. He later was given a tour of the new building by Mike Keller, dean of the business school.

The senator, who grew up in Vermillion, said he has yet to make a decision on his own political future. "It's too early to tell," he said, when asked if he plans to seek another Senate term. "I'm up in 2014, and we're yet in 2012, so I'll wait and see."

He believes that the campaign for the presidency that pits President Barack Obama against his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, will be "close and tough."



Sen. Tim Johnson tours classroom and a lecture facility Thursday in the new Beacom Hall building which houses the Beacom School of Business on the University of South Dakota campus. Serving as tour guide is Mike Keller, dean of the business school.

(Photo by David Lias)

"I think it's too early to say what will happen," Johnson said. "But legislatively, Congress is too often known for not getting things done in an election year. We'll see what happens. We have had a rush of things completed this year - it doesn't look as bad as all of that - and we'll be making progress, as far as I'm concerned, throughout the year."

Johnson hopes that the new Farm Bill being considered by Congress will be passed by the Senate without facing a filibuster.

"The bill looks good from a northern agricultural perspective," he said. "But the southerners aren't satisfied, as of yet. The southerners have the rice and cotton and peanuts, and they're not happy about this farm bill. We in the Northern Plains are pretty satisfied with the Senate farm bill. As you know, the farm bill can be held up by one person in the Senate, much less a filibuster, so we'll see what

happens.

"We need bipartisanship on the farm bill. It's always been that way," Johnson said. "It's less partisan and more regional, as far as attitudes toward the farm bill. Republicans and Democrats in the north are all together, and unfortunately, Republicans and Democrats in the south don't see it that way."

Johnson said he hopes the farm bill is approved sometime this fall. Otherwise action would have to be taken during the lame duck session of Congress following the November election.

If Congress still failed to pass the legislation in 2012, the current bill's provisions would need to be extended into 2013, he said.

Economic uncertainty in several European countries, Johnson said, is

currently casting a pall on fiscal recovery efforts in the United States.

"Anything can happen that is beyond the president's control," he said. "But the lesson that Europe is learning is that they cannot solve their (economic) problems through austerity alone. They must combine austerity with growth to be satisfied with the outcome,

and the president is doing that quite well - not good enough, but he's doing his best.

"We'll see what the combination of growth and austerity does as opposed to the Europeans, the Germans especially, who want austerity alone," Johnson said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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