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Business Group Endorses General Assembly Slate

By Randal Edgar

WARWICK — Voicing support for a pro-business, pro-jobs agenda, the Rhode Island State-wide Coalition's Business Network endorsed nine General Assembly candidates Wednesday based on what the group said is the candidates' willingness to put the state's interests ahead of politics.

The endorsements, the first for the business arm of the state's largest taxpayer advocacy group, struck a precise balance, with support going to four Democrats, four Republicans and one independent.

"We don't care about your party," said RISC political consultant Jeffrey S. Deckman, on hand as the group announced the candidates at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. "We care about what you think."

The list of endorsed candidates includes six incumbents and three challengers — all deemed to have a favorable stance on the group's issues and a chance of winning their races, Deckman said.

On the list are: Representatives Lisa Baldelli-Hunt, D-Woonsocket; Jon Brien, D-Woonsocket; Douglas Gablinske, D-Bristol; and Brian Newberry, R-North Smithfield; plus Senators Edward O'Neill, I-Lincoln; and Michael Pinga, D-West Warwick.

Also on the list are Stephanie Santos Sivalingam, an East Providence Republican who is challenging Republican Rep. John Savage; Chris Ottiano, a Portsmouth Republican who is challenging incumbent Democratic Sen. Charles Levesque; and Sean Gately, a Cranston Republican who is challenging incumbent Democratic Sen. Beatrice Lanzi.

RISC leaders said the endorsements — and the financial support that will come with them — will help to balance the influence of public-sector unions on Assembly races and help Network-endorsed candidates who face union-backed challengers.

To raise money, the group is distributing pledge cards, with the aim of getting businesses to send donations to endorsed candidates. The organization has raised \$100,000 and now, with endorsements made, it is seeking to raise \$225,000, said Arlene Violet, a former state attorney general and radio talk show host who is helping to lead the effort.

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RISC leaders said Tuesday's endorsements are just a first wave, with as many as 10 more expected after the Sept. 14 primaries.

The goal is not a dramatic turnover in the General Assembly, said RISC chairman Harry L. Staley, but incremental change.

"If we can elect 10, 12 candidates ... once the people who are there return with the knowledge that there are a lot of new faces in the room, they may be thinking a little bit differently about how they handle some of these issues," he said.

Most of the endorsed candidates downplayed the notion that they will be stigmatized for accepting the endorsements.

"I feel as though there are two types of Democrats," Baldelli-Hunt said. "There are Democrats like myself and like the folks who are standing here today, and there are Democrats who lean to the left, and they call themselves Democrats, but I'm not convinced that they're Democrats, and that's where I feel the balance needs to come back."

The group did not endorse races for governor and other statewide offices because its focus is specifically on the Assembly, which "is where the power is," Deckman said.

Still, the event attracted three gubernatorial candidates — Democrat Frank T. Caprio and Republicans Victor G. Moffitt and John F. Robitaille. Republican attorney general candidate Erik B. Wallin also attended.