

Teens participate in town hall with Bucks congressman

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, February 12, 2012 12:00 am



Art Gentile

Penridge senior Justin Discigil asks a question as moderator to Rep. Mike Fitzpatrick during a Kids Voting forum at Penridge High School on Friday.

Bucks County students had an hour and 15 minutes with Congressman Mike Fitzpatrick on Friday and by all accounts used their time wisely.

They asked the 8th District Republican 19 questions on everything from the committees on which he serves to his opinions on alternative energy, the cost of college, the military, the Middle East, term limits and the negativity in Washington.

The question-and-answer session at Penridge High School, moderated by seniors Elise Nonnenman and Justin Discigil, and sponsored by Kids Voting and the Bucks County Intermediate Unit, allowed students from several Bucks County districts to participate by video streaming the action.

"It exceeded my expectations," said Richard Coe, executive director of Kids Voting Southeast Pennsylvania. "The congressman was thoughtful and his responses were directed at the young peoples' level. This was certainly nonpartisan."

Coe said Kids Voting began in 2002 with the support of Fitzpatrick, who was then a Bucks County commissioner.

The congressman was greeted by an audience of about 125 Penridge students from Advanced Placement and Honors Political Science classes.

Joining the proceedings online were nearly 1,000 students from Quakertown, Council Rock North and South, Pennsbury, Bristol Borough, Red Cedar Academy, part of the Bucks County Intermediate Unit, William Tennent, New Hope-Solebury, Log College Middle School and Morrisville Middle School.

"It shows this is democracy in action, and a way for students to have a role in that democracy," said Keith Veverka, supervisor of the Penridge High School social studies department. "This was a great experience for Bucks County students."

Fitzpatrick told the students that participating in these types of forums educates him on what his constituents are thinking.

"It helps me become an informed voter," he said.

Other points made by Fitzpatrick:

On the negative political environment: "When people find it difficult to get work or are worried about keeping a job, when people are stressed and in difficult economic conditions, that's when rhetoric is high."

On the economy: He said it's "starting to move forward" but is "still in a very fragile state." He discounted the 8.3 percent unemployment rate, saying "it's in double digits" because people whose unemployment benefits run out are not counted.

On health care: "We need health care reform desperately" He said President Obama "missed the mark" because he "dealt with access but didn't deal with costs." He talked about the need to lower costs by shopping across state lines and liability reform to stop doctors from practicing defensive medicine.

On the Middle East: He called it a "critical time. ... When you overthrow one particular form of government, what replaces it must be better." Iraq and Afghanistan "improved as a result of our presence and the sacrifice of the men and women of our country."

On the proper role of the federal government in education: "I'm not one who believes that (continually) throwing money equates to great education." He said he favors fully funding special education and leaving basic education to local communities.

On term limits: He sponsored a bill limiting representatives to four two-year terms and senators to two six-year terms for senators. "Having the same folks there for 30, 40, 50 years, those ideas may be a little stale," he said.

Amanda Painter, a senior from Perkasio, said she "agreed with many of the points" Fitzpatrick made.

Matthew Tomlinson, a senior from Sellersville, said he appreciated the congressman's comments on energy.

"He talked about alternative energy but also said we need to continue what we're doing on the conventional side," Tomlinson said. "I think we need more of that. It's what everybody should be doing."

Painter and Tomlinson called themselves Democrats, and said they could see themselves supporting Fitzpatrick.

"His views were moderate," Painter said. Tomlinson shook his head in agreement. "I think balancing the left and the right is critical."