

Security tight as Kirk, Manzullo talk budget

By Chuck Sweeny

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ROCKFORD — From 350 to 400 Rock River Valley residents braved the cold this morning and drove to the Stenstrom Center on Rockford's southeast edge to take part in a town hall meeting with U.S. Sen. Mark Kirk, R-Ill., and U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo, R-Egan.

Police officers were abundant at the Rockford event, which came two weeks to the day after a gunman's shooting spree at a "Congress on Your Corner" event in a Tucson, Ariz., shopping center. Six people were killed, and U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., was seriously wounded. Giffords hadn't hired security guards, and police weren't there.

In stark contrast, the Rockford Police Department's eight-member dignitary protection unit was at Stenstrom Center to guard Manzullo and Kirk, and about half a dozen Rock Valley College police officers patrolled the building. Rockford and RVC squad cars cruised the parking lot before, during and after the two-hour event.

"This is the safest place in town today," Mayor Larry Morrissey told a reporter.

The town hall meeting had a tea party atmosphere, and Kirk and Manzullo, both fiscal conservatives, had to play defense when fielding questions from some audience members. They brought along Andrew Biggs, an American Enterprise Institute scholar, who said nations that reduce debt by cutting spending have healthier economies than those that raise taxes.

David Hale of the Rockford Tea Party called a House Republican plan to cut the federal budget by \$2.5 trillion over 10 years "meager." He asked Kirk and Manzullo to consider supporting an \$11 trillion cut advocated by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. Neither answered the question directly.

Manzullo said he voted against "\$1.4 trillion in unnecessary spending in the last Congress. ... There are probably 150 organizations that have different plans to bring down the size of government. The biggest thing is for people to expect less from the federal government."

Manzullo advocates earmark reform to help trim spending, but said he's against slashing all earmarks because if that happens, Gov. Pat Quinn and the mayor of Chicago will control how all federal money coming back to Illinois will be spent.

Kirk said he ran for the Senate and won “because I was the candidate who was going to do less rather than more.”

But Kirk noted he can only do so much in the Senate because Republicans are in the minority: “The bad news is that fiscal liberals are still in control.”

Kirk said the “No. 1 vote” in the new Congress will be on raising the debt limit, which is now \$14.3 trillion. That limit will be reached in April because the government borrows and spends more money than it takes in.

“We have three choices. Choice one is to say, no, absolutely no extension,” Kirk said. The audience applauded, but Kirk issued a warning: “Two things happen if you say no. The credit of the United States collapses, and we have difficulty sending out Social Security checks the very next month. So 40 million Americans on Social Security would be in a real bind.”

The crowd was silent.

Kirk doesn’t want to give the president a blank-check “yes” vote, though. Instead, he wants to raise the debt limit “only in little bites,” so that conservatives can attach anti-spending reforms to each bill.

Mark Sanderson, a Belvidere alderman, urged Kirk and Manzullo to endorse a Belvidere City Council resolution “asking for abolishment of pensions for state, federal and local officials,” to save money.

Manzullo defended his pension, saying the federal plan was reformed in 1980 and is on sound financial footing with reasonable growth expectations. It’s the same plan that covers millions of federal employees, Manzullo said.

Kirk responded indirectly, saying Congress shouldn’t take a pay raise. He said he’s cut his office budget 15 percent and urged Congress and the White House to do the same. Kirk also advocated a 10-year capital gains tax holiday for startup small businesses, explaining that “we need a growth agenda as well as a budget cutting agenda.”

A questioner asked Kirk and Manzullo to consider Defense Department cuts, which are absent from House Republican budget cutting plans. Both said they would.

“There’s no reason that when the ax falls, it can’t fall also on the Department of Defense,” Manzullo said. “Why should Defense and Homeland Security be exempt from a freeze? Don’t tell me savings can’t be found across the board.”

Kirk said the U.S. military mission in Iraq is winding down, “which is an enormous relief on the operations and budget of the Department of Defense.” He also said the military doesn’t need a joint forces command or three military commissary commission systems for the Army, Navy and Air Force: “We just need one.”

Kirk also said he supports Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’ recommendation to cancel a new fighting vehicle for the Marines.

Republicans must come up with defense cuts, and Democrats need to come up with domestic spending cuts, Kirk concluded.

A young soldier told Kirk and Manzullo that veterans have a hard time getting civilian jobs.

Tyechia Price of Rockford is just 26, but she’s been a soldier for nearly six years. Price returned to the U.S. last week from her second tour of duty in Iraq and is now in the Army Reserves. She said veterans like her have trouble getting jobs when they come home. Some employers see them as potentially unstable and a liability, she said.

“We serve our country and we are proud to do that, but when we come home, we sometimes wonder why we did, because there’s not much for us here,” Price told Manzullo and Kirk.

Kirk responded to Price, saying he is “very much” in favor of a federal preference for hiring veterans, especially wounded or combat veterans.

Reach Senior Editor Chuck Sweeny at csweeny@rrstar.com or 815-987-1366.