

THE DENVER POST

As voting in Colorado begins, Senate candidate Joe O’Dea turns to the border

Nick Coltrain

October 25, 2022

With just more than two weeks until Colorado counts its ballots, U.S. Senate hopeful Joe O’Dea will head to Texas.

The Republican businessman will visit the United States-Mexico border at the Rio Grande Valley Wednesday and Thursday. There, he plans to hear from locals about migrant deaths on private property, damage and safety concerns from human and drug smuggling operations across private property, and anti-crossing efforts like the border wall and a collaboration with the state of Texas to install razor wire on private property.

O’Dea, who is seeking to unseat U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet, has been hammering the incumbent Democrat and President Joe Biden over migration. O’Dea frequently ties issues at the border to the fentanyl crisis in Colorado and across the country. He mentioned the trip Sunday and his campaign shared a rough itinerary Monday.

“I’m headed to the border because Michael Bennet won’t,” O’Dea said at a campaign event Sunday, citing record overdose deaths in 2021. “I’m going down there to find out what is it we can do to help get this border secured so we can quit killing our kids. Fentanyl deaths are over the top right now. We lost 1,900 kids last year to drug overdose here in Colorado. Every state is a border state. It’s coming straight up I-25.”

More than 1,800 Coloradans died of drug overdose in 2021, fueled by fentanyl and methamphetamine. In other interviews, O’Dea noted that the deaths were among all Coloradans.

O’Dea’s trip is sandwiched between two debates scheduled with Bennet this week. O’Dea spokesperson Kyle Kohli said recently released figures from U.S. Customs and Border Protection show an “escalating crisis” at the border. O’Dea wants to learn more about how to solve it with first-hand experience, he said.

Data from the federal organization, released Friday night, showed 2.2 million encounters with migrants last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30. That’s up from 1.6 million in the prior year and 859,500 in 2019, the next highest since 2017.

“This is clearly something that the administration is trying to bury,” Kohli said. “This is an emergency that Congress needs to be treating like an emergency and it’s not.”

Colorado State University ethnic studies professor Ernesto Sagás said the influx at the border is a new phenomenon and unlike historic norms. This influx isn’t driven by undocumented

immigrants trying to avoid border patrol, he said. Instead, they are largely people fleeing totalitarian governments and dictatorships in Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, he said. They hope to cross into the United States so they can seek out border patrol and ask for legal asylum.

“Oftentimes the term illegal immigrant is thrown in there,” Sagás said. “Technically, these people aren’t illegal or undocumented or unauthorized. It’s just that we haven’t seen this scope of people and they all have rights as soon as they set foot in the country and claim asylum.”

Most follow the legal protocol laid out before them while they wait for their cases to be heard in court, he said.

O’Dea hasn’t characterized the migrants as illegal immigrants but instead has said the influx stretches border patrol thin, making it easier for smugglers to make it across with either human victims or drugs.

According to a recent study by the libertarian Cato Institute, more than 90% of fentanyl seizures at the border happen at legal crossing points, not migration routes. It found a minuscule number of people detained for unauthorized border crossing — .02% — had any fentanyl on them whatsoever. Nearly all convicted fentanyl traffickers are U.S. citizens.

O’Dea has previously pledged to protect DREAMers, or undocumented immigrants who arrived in the country as children, while also promising to beef up border security.

He announced his intent to visit the border the same day he was endorsed by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. DeSantis is widely speculated to be a Republican 2024 presidential candidate and has early, preliminary support from O’Dea in that race.

DeSantis also recently faced scrutiny for using taxpayer dollars to ship migrants from Texas to Massachusetts. O’Dea said on Meet The Press in September that DeSantis and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott “were right to bring some visibility to this issue.”

Bennet was an author of the so-called Gang of Eight bill early in his Senate career that would have overhauled the country’s immigration system. It passed the Senate but Republican leadership in the U.S. House did not bring it up for a vote. He also touts ongoing immigration reform efforts, including on agricultural migration specifically.