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Mayors: Candidates must show environmental leadership

By Savannah Morning News
Created 2007-11-02 23:30

COLUMBIA, S.C. - More than 100 South Carolina mayors, including Bluffton's Hank Johnston, released an open letter to presidential candidates Friday, stressing strong concern over global warming and asking candidates traveling around early voting South Carolina to address the issue.

Will campaigns listen?

"If they're not going to listen to mayors (who represent voters), who are they going to listen to?" Johnston asked.

The group includes Democratic and Republican mayors who collectively represent more than 1 million of the state's residents.

Mayors of Hilton Head Island and Beaufort also signed on.

The letter was endorsed by several environmental groups: the Carolina Climate Network, Upstate Forever, Coastal Conservation League, Conservation Voters of South Carolina, South Carolina Wildlife Federation and the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy. It was released as a paid ad in several South Carolina media by the Carolina Climate Network.

"Since solving global climate change will establish a healthier, more efficient and more secure nation, we expect candidates from all parties to outline clear plans for addressing this issue," the letter reads.

The latest Winthrop University/ETV poll, though, which was released Thursday, shows a sharp partisan divide on the issue of global warming.

Pollsters surveyed 522 likely Republican primary voters and 534 likely Democratic primary voters.

The margin of error was 4.29 percent for Republicans and 4.24 percent for Democrats.

Among Democrats, 79.5 believe global warming is real and is occurring now, or is real but its effects won't be felt for a long time.

In contrast, 49.1 percent of Republican candidates fell into those two categories, while 38.5 percent of Republicans believe the effects of global warming are being exaggerated.

Only 6.8 percent of Democrats believe the effects are being blown out of proportion.

Charleston Mayor Joe Riley, a Democrat, doesn't think those attitudes, however, will affect whether

political campaigns respond to the letter, or that Democratic candidates will respond more favorably than Republicans.

"This is the movement of our time, and future generations will either live healthily and a good quality of life (or not)," Riley said. "It depends on what we do right now and certainly the actions of the next president of the United States."

Aiken's Mayor Fred Cavanaugh, a Republican, said he believes that some global warming is occurring, but he isn't sure how much.

But he said environmental concerns overlap with energy and security concerns.

He is particularly worried about reports that foreign countries, including enemies of the United States, that are oil-rich are forming allegiances.

"And here we sit," Cavanaugh said. "Who are we joining in with? We could have our oil supply cut off."

The mayors think it's the duty of the next president to provide leadership on the global-warming issue.

"We have just got to have a massive orientation, I believe, at the presidential level in order to address this issue," Johnston said.

But, as mayors, they also believe they have a role in pushing for action.

States the letter, "It is our duty to add our voice to the growing chorus of scientific, business, and community leaders who say the time to act on global climate change is now."

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