

## NEWS

# Van Drew, Kennedy share stage but little else at forum

**Joseph P. Smith** Vineland Daily Journal

Published 2:26 p.m. ET Oct. 10, 2020 | Updated 8:51 a.m. ET Oct. 11, 2020

GALLOWAY – The future of funding for law enforcement drew the first sparks at a forum Thursday night between Republican Congressman Jeff Van Drew and Democratic challenger Amy Kennedy.

Although they answered questions for more than an hour, they only occasionally spoke directly at each other.

**More:** Voting results unofficial, but Van Drew, Kennedy look forward to November

**More:** Van Drew shares stage with Trump during Wildwood campaign rally

The 2nd Congressional District race has some dramatic elements not seen everywhere.

Van Drew, a lifetime Democrat, switched to the Republican Party under what he describes as duress. He defied his party's leaders on the impeachment of President Donald Trump, costing him endorsements for a second term. The party had moved too far to the left for him to remain, he said.

Kennedy often mentions her former job as public school teacher, but she also is the wife of former Democratic Congressman Patrick J. Kennedy. He is the son of deceased Sen. Ted Kennedy. The couple run The Kennedy Forum, a nonprofit he founded in 2013 to work on mental health issues.

Van Drew is closely linked to the president, who headlined a major rally for the newly converted congressman in Wildwood.

The district is competitive for candidates of either party, but typically leans Republican. Van Drew won as a Democrat, but only after the unexpected retirement of Republican incumbent Frank LoBiondo. And he was moved to stress often in public he is not a hyper-partisan.

The candidates finally got testy with each other when both were asked to define what they thought the call to “defund the police” entails.

Van Drew said the concept clearly was to cut funding, using it for other purposes, and leaving fewer police to patrol with less resources.

“Defunding the police means they won’t get the equipment, the safety equipment, the vests, whatever else they need to make sure that they stay alive as they take bullets for you,” Van Drew said.

“Did you see the lady the other day?,” he then said. “The officer, an officer of color by the way, who took three bullets to the head but still was putting the tourniquet around her partner. These are the kinds of people that we’re talking about. And that’s what defunding does.”

Kennedy, who is in her first run for elected office, agreed with the statement. She then accused Van Drew of accusing her, falsely, of supporting defunding police. The dispute goes back to a forum before NAACP officials.

“I believe, as you do, that we need to have (police) that are better trained, that are addressing bias,” Kennedy said. “As we said earlier, bias in our system needs to be addressed. That when we are talking about how we move together as a country and mitigate the violence that we’re seeing in this nation right now. That we should be talking about solutions to that by bringing both parties to the table, making sure law enforcement has a voice at the table as well as community members.”

The meeting, hosted at Stockton University, is the last face-to-face meeting planned for the candidates with just weeks to go in the race.

“First of all, respectfully, during the primary, you absolutely — and we have the quotes and we’ll give them to you in case you forgot,” Van Drew said.

“I would love that because that isn’t what I said,” Kennedy answered.

“We will,” Van Drew said. “We will.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“(You) supported defunding the police,” Van Drew said. “So, that, No. 1 is not true.

Kennedy came back to the dispute to add she had told NAACP officials she only said she saw “merit in conversations around how we provide funding” and make sure mental health services are available.

“And you took that and spun it to say that I supported defunding the police,” Kennedy said. “I never even said the word ‘defund.’ But you’ve used that in every ad, in mailers about me. And you have constantly used that refrain.”

The next question, posed to both, did not calm feelings. Kennedy was asked if there was a Van Drew ad she found offensive or false.

Kennedy said attack ads against her seem to be from a national Republican template. “I would like to be seen as an individual,” she said.

“Maybe look at my policies on my page before slamming me as phony, liberal, elitist, radical,” Kennedy said. “You know. All of those things that I think anyone that went and took a look at the website would say, ‘Oh. That really doesn’t seem to fit that school teacher. I don’t think that’s her.’”

“Mrs. Kennedy, respectfully, I don’t think you’re just that ‘homespun school teacher,’” Van Drew responded, with a shadow of a smile. “You’re a little different. And I don’t mean that in a negative way, but you are attempting to achieve something very different. And your family is very different, and there’s nothing wrong with any of that. But, you’re just not a ‘little homespun school teacher.’”

“Secondly, I think that, you know, a lot of the ads are offensive because sometimes we don’t want to hear what is the truth,” Van Drew said.

There were agreements among the two.

Kennedy and Van Drew agreed that the theory of global warming should be taken seriously, that beach replenishment is not an optimum option but needs to continue, and that flood insurance for shore residents must be maintained while at the same time making houses more flood resistant.

Both also agreed that economic development in the region, and especially Atlantic City, requires better public transportation.

Both said that abortion should not be eliminated. Van Drew, though, said unrestricted abortion is not right and specifically said he could not support late term abortions or “live birth abortions.”

Both also said they would like to see the federal government stop classifying marijuana as a controlled drug. It would help with research, for example, they said.

On ideas for restricting access to firearms, Van Drew called New Jersey actions like reducing the capacity of magazine-fed firearms “nonsense.” He is a gun owner and had to comply with the change.

“We need to punish the people who are creating and actually committing the crimes,” he said. “Not legal gun owners.”

Kennedy said she supports “common sense laws” to include a ban on civilians owning “assault” weapons.

The New Jersey and national responses to the coronavirus pandemic this year led Van Drew to strongly criticize Gov. Phil Murphy, especially for not allowing business to reopen in South Jersey based on the region’s relatively healthier status.

Kennedy said “mixed messaging” on public health measures left people uncertain of what was best.

Van Drew said the first step in reviewing the pandemic’s history is understanding how it happened.

“It did start in China,” Van Drew said. “And we have to understand that our CDC was not allowed to go into China and really evaluate what was happening. In fact, we don’t know if it really came from a ‘wet meat’ market or actually came from a laboratory. I believe it probably came from a laboratory. We don’t even know if this was genetically mutated.

“What we do know is, fortunately the president did say there’d be travel restrictions quite early on,” he said. “And afterward had travel restrictions with Europe. Now, at that time, he was called ‘racist.’ He was said he was xenophobic because he did that. Thank God he did.”

Asked about a national “lockdown,” as suggested by Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, Kennedy said she hoped it would not be necessary.

“I don’t think he would call a lockdown unless it was absolutely necessary,” Kennedy said. “And at that point, I would hope he’s following the direction of scientists and doctors.”

Van Drew said he would not support the federal government mandating mask use.

"Each state is different," Van Drew said. "So, what Wyoming needs to do and North Dakota needs to do may be very different than what the city of Washington or the city of New York has to do. That’s – you know, there’s a little bit of ‘states’ rights’ here.

"I would support that we all should be careful and we should be doing what’s medically correct," he said. "But there are good doctors and good leaders in those areas that can make those decisions.

The state’s order to rely on mailing in ballots separated Kennedy and Van Drew. He drew a distinction between using absentee ballots, a well-established practice, with what the Murphy administration is doing.

Van Drew said he was worried that millions of ballots are going out with no fraud countermeasures in place. He said he had told the governor the best option was to stagger voting by machine over several days.

“Traditional vote-by-mail is fine, because you have to make the request,” Van Drew said. “Right now, we’re just putting the ballots out there. Honestly, we don’t need to have President Trump tell us that. All you need to do is talk to family and friends and I guarantee you they will tell you. And it even happened in the primary that they’re getting all kinds of ballots and they don’t know where they are coming from.”

“I’m excited that we are among the states that are making sure that everybody will be safe and able to participate in the process.” Kennedy said. “I think the primary was a great example of why the

system works.”

Kennedy said paper ballots are secure. “And the whole narrative that President Trump has been pushing, I think, is destructive,” she said.

*Joe Smith is a N.E. Philly native transplanted to South Jersey more than 30 years ago. 'The truth is like a lion. You don't have to defend it.' He is a former editor and current senior staff writer at The Daily Journal in Vineland. Have a news tip? Reach out at (856) 563-5252 or [jsmith@thedailyjournal.com](mailto:jsmith@thedailyjournal.com) or follow me on Twitter, @jpsmith-dj. Help support local journalism with a subscription to The Daily Journal.*