Statewide hope for GOP, but not yet

With a passionate defense of his Baton Rouge district’s needs, Garret Graves might as well have said up front that he’s not a likely candidate for governor in 2019. Many of the Republican opponents of Gov. John Bel Edwards have seen Graves as a viable contender. The two-term member of Congress is young and presentable, having been a success in earlier jobs as a Capitol Hill staffer and then as coastal preservation director under former Gov. Bobby Jindal.

Among all the things that Jindal now takes hits for in the court of public opinion, he largely escapes indictment for matters related to the coast. Graves’ work on the development of a master plan for the coast and its early implementation was one of the bright spots in the Jindal administration.

Graves won the district formerly held by Bill Cassidy, now a U.S. senator. With an arm dipping into the Houma-Thibodaux region, the district is still primarily that of metro Baton Rouge. It is a GOP seat and he almost waltzed in, as his principal opponent was an old crook named Edwin W. Edwards.

What’s not to like? If you’re a Republican voter in the district, Graves struck before the Press Club of Baton Rouge many of the right notes, including frustration with the slow pace of flood restoration grants, and the traffic woes that bedevil everyone in the capital city.

If you’re a Republican voter outside the district, though, Graves’ policy prescriptions would be somewhat jarring.

Among his criticisms was that the highway priority program, aimed at funding roads based on needs instead of politics, “isn’t working,” is “politicized” and in particular the state’s gasoline tax pennies are wasted because most of them are paying off bureaucrats in Baton Rouge, and other pennies are wasted paying off bonds for the old TIMED program.

Sounds pretty good, in a shallow George Wallace way, attacking the bureaucrats. Of course, it also comes a bit oddly from a man who has spent almost his entire adult life on the taxpayers’ payroll.

Congressman Garret Graves, left, answers a question from the audience as state transportation Secretary Shawn Wilson watches, during an April forum on traffic issues in Baton Rouge.

And step away from your district’s woes and look at a statewide perspective.

The TIMED bonds are taking too long to pay off, as all agree, and in fact some general-purpose gas tax revenues are today helping to pay those. But they also paid for a statewide program, adopted by both Legislature and the voters, to connect the state’s major cities with four-lane highways. In terms of economic development, not at all a bad idea.

If one day one wants to be governor, a critical idea is that the areas of the state served by the TIMED highways are the places that would feel — heck, already feel — neglected by Baton Rouge and New Orleans. To say that maintenance work on state highways is money spent “in the building,” as Graves said dismissively, is not good politics generally. In fact, if you live elsewhere, you want to ensure that road funding is based on need.

As Graves rightly said, Baton Rouge cannot deal with the problems of a new Mississippi River bridge alone. That goes double for Lafayette and Interstate 49, or Lake Charles and the Interstate 10 bridge that needs to be replaced, and so on. Well, call it triple in north Louisiana, where declining relative population is a worry for civic leaders there.

Those places are apt to feel they will be left behind unless there is some nonpolitical road process; that doesn’t mean they are insensitive to the capital’s concerns, or that of the Crescent City. But if you are planning to run for governor, it’s important to know what all the state needs.

Graves talked incessantly about what Baton Rouge isn’t getting, but just north of his district is St. Francisville, formerly in the district. It’s got a new Mississippi River bridge, but probably it is among those elsewhere in the state — about 20 miles from Graves’ district — where “practically nobody drives.”

Most people would say St. Francisville is in the Baton Rouge area, even if it is now represented by U.S. Rep. Ralph Abraham, physician from north Louisiana. But if you’re not thinking about a statewide race, what’s the harm? That’s the point.

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