

Northeast region should not overlook Rendell

TRADITIONALLY, NORTHEASTERN Pennsylvania has been a fierce battleground between candidates in the state's Democratic primary for governor. Not so this year. Widespread suspicion among northeast Pennsylvanians of Philadelphia and its former mayor, 59-year-old gubernatorial candidate Edward G. Rendell, seemed to have lessened his chances in the region.

Public opinion has already given the nomination to state Auditor General Robert P. Casey Jr. of Scranton because he has more money, the support of the labor unions and a quiet compassion for as well as the trust of low-income families.

But Casey, 41, does not have the political experience necessary to address the state's troubled economy. That is why voters should think twice before writing off Rendell, especially when the state faces a deficit of up to \$622 million by the end of the fiscal year in June.

Northeastern Pennsylvanians would do well to study Rendell's record. When he was elected mayor of Philadelphia in 1991, Rendell faced near impossible circumstances. Over the previous decade, the city's traditional manufacturing base had given way to service and high-tech industries. Active divestment by major corporations and the federal government as well as the downsizing of local businesses resulted in lost jobs, the elimination of social programs and increased racial tension. Philadelphia entered the 1990s with a deficit of \$250 million and on the brink of bankruptcy.

Undeterred by the challenge, Rendell led the city in an extraordinary comeback. His ability to eliminate municipal waste and inefficiency, maintain a bal-

COMMENTARY

WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

anced budget while retaining businesses by offering them tax breaks, and attract a tourist industry, allowed him to rescue the city. In the process, Rendell transformed a potentially disastrous situation into "one of the most stunning turn-arounds in history," according to The New York Times.

In 2002, Pennsylvania — and especially the northeast region — demands a governor who not only has the political experience necessary to balance the state budget, retain businesses, create jobs and attract a tourist industry, but one who knows how to achieve those goals through a sound fiscal strategy.

Rendell recently revealed a creative but practical strategy to revitalize blighted area in cities, boroughs and towns across the state. The plan calls for issuing state bonds to create a \$100 million revolving-loan fund to turn blighted industrial properties, which often need environmental clean-up, into desirable real estate. Another \$100 million loan fund, also financed by state bonds, would be used to help smaller urban and rural communities structure loans to private developers backed by future tax revenue. Because the plan relies on bonds for financing, it would only cost \$55 million in new state spending from the general fund for programs in housing and redevelopment assistance.

Coupled with a proposal to free up \$150 million more by increasing the statutory limit on state economic-devel-

opment bonds, the revolving-loan plan will allow Rendell to create more jobs, initiate local development projects, revitalize blighted areas and sustain economic growth in Pennsylvania.

Nor should Rendell's empathy for the common working man and low-income families be underestimated. I had the opportunity of getting to know the mayor five years ago when I taught his son at a Philadelphia high school. What impressed me about him was his ability to be himself around people of so many different social and economic backgrounds.

I found that out once when I was involved in a community clean-up of one of Philadelphia's blighted neighborhoods. I looked over my shoulder to find Rendell, clad in blue jeans and an old sweatshirt, cleaning up a trash-strewn lot. I couldn't help but ask him what a public official who had recently been hailed as "America's Mayor" was doing at a clean-up.

"When I look at this neighborhood," he replied, "I see people who desperately want to work, who desperately want to have decent lives, and I really feel a sense of obligation. I know government can't do everything, but somebody's got to speak for those people who want to help themselves, somebody's got to show that they care."

Hopefully, northeastern Pennsylvanians will take a closer look at Ed Rendell the man and his record before dismissing one of the finest public servants in recent history as their next governor.

William C. Kashatus, a native of the Wyoming Valley, is a professional historian at the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester, Pa. He has written several books.

T I M E S ◆ L E A D E R

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