Citizens of Missouri’s 136th House District decide this month whether to vote Republican Kevin Austin to a third term or elect Democrat Jeff Munzinger to the seat.
It’s been eight years since a Democrat has actually run for the position.

“I know a lot of people were willing to say ‘you just can’t win there’, but obviously we hope to prove those people wrong,” Munzinger said.

In fact, this is the first time that Austin, a Republican who has held the seat since 2012, has an opponent in the general election. He was last challenged in the August 2012 primary, when he first ran for representative.

District 136 encompasses the southeast portion of Springfield and Greene County. The Highway 60 and 65 interchange acts as the district’s center, spanning north to Battlefield Mall and west to Campbell Avenue.

Background

Jeff Munzinger is a father of two children and has been married for 43 years. He says he plans to step away from his 25 year old sales agency Munzinger & Company Inc. at the end of the year. He attended college at the University of Missouri where he graduated with a journalism degree.

“The fact that I’m older has the advantage that as I step away from my business, I will have full time to devote to the legislature and I won’t have any special interest that I have to represent while I’m there,” Munzinger said.

Kevin Austin is a father of two boys and has been married for 24 years.

He has a financial management degree from Missouri State University and a law degree from the University of Missouri. Austin practices law as a member of Keck & Austin, LLC, which focuses on business counseling and litigation and insurance defense.

Austin says his experience and views on low tax, low regulation, and good jobs make him the choice candidate. He also feels his role as assistant majority floor leader gives Springfieldians a stronger voice.
“We’ve only had three House representatives that’s from Springfield that’s been in leadership over the last 100 years – I’m the third one. That gives us a very strong voice at the table and I want to continue to do that like I did last year in my leadership role,” he said.

Education

Both candidates agree that properly funding education in Missouri is a priority. For Munzinger, more needs to be done, and says citizens in the 136th District are of the same mind.

“We have not properly funded our public schools and we haven't properly funded our colleges either,” Munzinger said.

Rep. Austin says the state has continued to make progress on this front, noting the education budget has increased each year he’s been in office.

He added that lawmakers this year removed a provision “so now the increases that we provide for K-12; Springfield will get their fair share according to the formula.”

Engagement

Both candidates want to see more involvement from officials in Jefferson City. Rep. Austin pointed to a desire for more engagement from Gov. Nixon, who is wrapping up his 8-year term as the state’s top executive.

“Both Republicans and Democrats had problems working with the governor’s office, we would like to have seen them more involved even though he was from a party other than mine,” Austin said.

For Munzinger, a lack of engagement from legislators in part motivated him to run for representative.

“I would go to Jefferson City and advocate for various issues and I felt like the legislature was always unresponsive,” he said.
Legislative Successes

Austin is proud of the structure behind a tax-cut bill passed by the legislature in 2014.

“We've seen other states try to cut taxes and I think some of them may have over done it, some of them didn't do it enough, we pegged ours to be incremental based upon state revenue so if the state revenue goes down no tax cut if it goes up there could possibly be a tax cut.”

Under SB 509 (http://www.senate.mo.gov/14info/bts_web/Bill.aspx?SessionType=R&BillID=27723520), the cuts would begin in the 2017 budget year and only if the state sees income growth of at least $150 million a year. The bill phases in a reduction in the individual tax rate to 5.5 percent from the current 6 percent, while phasing in a 25-percent deduction on business income reported by individuals.

For Munzinger, ethics reform last year that increased the waiting period for a lawmaker to become a lobbyist to six months is viewed as a success.

“I’m part of a group that would have advocated for at least a year and perhaps two years but six months was better than nothing,” Munzinger said.

Republicans currently hold a supermajority in the statehouse. Both candidates feel that although they are members of different parties that working together is important. Austin said there are times when he and Democrats in the legislature “work together well” despite heated arguments on the senate floor.

Munzinger said if elected he hopes the other side would “see the merit of (democratic) arguments.”

Other Issues:
Austin says workforce development is needed in the district to have a ‘vibrant economy’ throughout Springfield.

“I’ve heard this from employer after employer after employer that ‘We would be willing to hire if we could find an employee that was qualified.”

As a solution, he suggests more collaboration between educators and private employers to help teach soft skills training on an individual level, naming Missouri State University and Ozarks Technical Community College as potential partners.

He also plans, if reelected, to continue work toward stemming what he calls overregulation. Austin says this can be more effective through a planned restructuring of the number and types of House committees.

“To where our committees will be just as much investigative as they are vetting and passing bills.”

Munzinger says payday loans need capped interest rates to keep those who need the service from incurring too much debt.

“I’m part of a group called Faith Voices of Southwest Missouri; it’s a group of 50 churches, that have been advocating for five years for the legislature to do that very thing to cap the rate at 36 percent,” he said.

He also advocates for local legislature to adopt Medicaid expansion.

“There’s a group called Missouri Health Care For All and that group estimates that for every year we do not accept this offer to expand Medicaid about 700 Missourians will die prematurely, and that just seems immoral to me.”

Funding (As of Oct. 27):

Rep. Austin has been fundraising heavily since well ahead of his uncontested primary in August. As of Oct. 27, he had raised over $233,000.

Munzinger, who was also unopposed in August, has been soliciting donations for months. His latest campaign finance report shows just over $68,000 raised.

More Information

Jeff Munzinger: https://www.facebook.com/MunzingerForMissouri136/ (https://www.facebook.com/MunzingerForMissouri136/)

Kevin Austin: http://www.kevinaustin.org (http://www.kevinaustin.org/?page_id=9)