

Jerry Howard: Welcome to Housing Developments. I'm Jerry Howard.

Jim Tobin: And I'm Jim Tobin. Hey, Jerry.

Jerry Howard: Hey, Jim. I know you're working hard now that Congress is coming back into session. They're going to try and pass the social spending bill. What do you think?

Jim Tobin: Yeah. Boy, Joe Mansion continues to be the speed break on that thing. We've talked about this. I really thought that they would get something done before the holidays, before Christmas in particular, if not right up onto Christmas Eve. I'm starting to doubt that now. I think this may actually bleed over into the new year. I still think they'll get it done but just maybe not this year.

Good news is they are going to pass an extension of the debt ceiling. That's something HB supports. We can't be defaulting on our debt. We're watching what mortgage rates might do under that scenario so that looks to be averted. They've passed a continuing resolution to fund the government into next year, so no government shutdown. That's a good thing. The last big item, I think unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your political persuasion, rolls over into the new year.

Jerry Howard: Well, Tom will tell on that. I do know though, speaking of the debt ceiling, your wife called me this today and asked if I could convince you to raise her debt ceiling for Christmas spending.

Jim Tobin: Well, it is the season so I'm not surprised. What'd you tell her?

Jerry Howard: Told her, of course, as long as it was for the kids and not for you.

Jim Tobin: There you go. It's for the kids. It's for the kids. Well, Jerry, how's... You know what? While we've got our friends here we're going to have a kind of the second half of our political discussion. Today, we're going to welcome in the executive director of the NRCC, that's the Republican house campaign arm to go along with our conversation with the DCCC last episode. But before we do that and welcome John in here, tell me about IBS again. It's been a week since we've talked, how's IBS going? How's it shaping up for Orlando?

Jerry Howard: I'm getting even more excited. Registration is coming along great. We are just ticking along. We're not going to be as big as we were in 2020 but we didn't expect to be, but we are going to have a very successful show. I'm speaking of our registrants across the board, from our builder members, to people in the industry who are not members which will give us a chance to recruit, to dealer distributors which are the people that our exhibitors like to see, all tracking very, very well and we've still got a long time to go for registration. Space sales, we're closing in on our goal already.

Jim Tobin: That's great.

Jerry Howard: I would be surprised if we don't reach the space sale goal before the Christmas break so I'm looking forward to it. Again, Magic Johnson will be coming and we'll have some great entertainment there as well. It's going to be a super time.

Jim Tobin: Yeah, it's always a place to be for the industry so I know I'm looking forward to seeing everybody that first week or first second full week of February. Well with that, why don't we welcome in our guest?

Well, it's my pleasure to introduce John Billings who is the executive director for the NRCC which is the National Republican Campaign Committee, the re-election and election arm of the US House of Representatives Republican party. John has been in politics for nearly two decades. He worked on Capitol Hill as a chief of staff for three different members of Congress and also worked for leading trade associations in the food retail and pharmaceutical industry so he knows world that we live in, Jerry, and the association side.

He previously worked at the NRCC running the incumbent retention program which successfully helped get every incumbent re-elected for the first time in 1994. In his current role, John oversees all facets of the operation of the committee. John, before we get going, I got a funny story for you. In your bio, the first time you've re-elected all the incumbents in 1994, my old boss in 1994 was Gary Franks from Connecticut, only the first one to lose re-election in 1996 from that original Republican wave class. He didn't do a good job of reminding everybody back home that he was a member of Congress and got summarily booted out in 1996. He might have been the start of that trend for you, that you just broke.

John Billings: That's great. Well, first of all, I'll add a story to that but thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you guys and to your members. My first boss was part of that class '94 too, Charlie Bass from New Hampshire. I'm originally from Connecticut. I grew up with Nancy Johnson as my representative. As I'll... We can talk about the elections but one of the things I've done as the NRCC executive director in... We're not getting ahead of ourselves but I'm a New England person, worked for a member of New Hampshire when I began in politics, and on the Hill, we had six house members from New England. Today, we have zero.

Jim Tobin: Yep.

John Billings: So one of my goals and one of my guarantees is that there will be a Republican representative in the House of Representatives from one of the New England states.

Jerry Howard: Well, since I'm a New Englander too and I grew up right across the river from where you went to college in Quechee, Vermont, let me ask you, is it possible

given the popularity of Vermont's governor and the fact that the Senate seat in Vermont is going to be open with Leahy announcing his retirement Vermont's tradition of the house member, moving up to the Senate that leaves potentially an open house seat in Vermont, any chance that the governor of Vermont would be a candidate for that? Because he's got 78% approval rating in the state.

John Billings: I would never say no one is not a potential candidate. I think Vermont is a unique state and what's crazy, Jerry, is I grew up in Quechee too at points. My parents had a house up there so I'm very, very familiar with that area and love it up in the upper river valley. I think quite honestly, there are a lot of opportunities out there given the state of the democratic party and the unpopularity of President Biden and their policies that it is opening up a lot of new territory that is going to be in play. You get the right candidate with the right messages and then enough resources to get out those messages, places like Vermont could be on the map. Again, I think New England has a unique thing of they tend to like their Republican governors. You look at Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, things like that so I would never take any state out of, or any district out of play right now, but it's places like that we're looking.

Jerry Howard: There you go. Well, we'll see. Let me ask you another question. That is, Jim and I are talking about the Republican primaries and looking at some of the people who are being challenged from within the party. It's pretty interesting. How do you all handle that fact and what do you think it means to your chances going forward?

John Billings: At the NRCC, we do not get involved in any primary election that's... We allow the voters of each of those districts to decide and the Republicans in those districts to decide who the best candidate is. I mean, our goal though, it's... I always say this job is a math equation. It's our responsibility to find at least 218 seats throughout this country that will be able to elect a Republican. I think what's interesting about house races, I'll always say, they're the largest local race on a ballot. If you think about anything above a congressional race is usually statewide so local issues matter, getting to know voters matter, talking about issues that are important to those voters matter. Whether it's a primary or general election, getting the individuals that are really connecting and connecting on the issues important to voters today is what's going to matter in the end.

Jim Tobin: John, do you think that, as Jerry mentioned, in the primaries, how do you think President Trump plays in some of those? I mean, that... It's a challenge because he's endorsing the Republicans to run against some incumbents and certainly the Democrats are going to try tie any Republican candidate to President Trump.

John Billings: Yeah.

Jim Tobin: We saw that obviously in the two gubernatorial elections that were waged just last month and perhaps successful in New Jersey, certainly not successful in Virginia. What effect do you think President Trump has on your candidates in particular?

John Billings: I mean, the reality is and what we're seeing, is the former president's policies and agenda of lower taxes, fewer regulations, and strong border security were immensely popular with voters and are immensely popular with voters and the issues have not changed in terms of what people truly care about. I think what you saw in Virginia and even in New Jersey where the Republican gubernatorial candidate just came up short, that if they want to make the midterms about President Trump in trying to say every Republican is President Trump to invoke a emotional reaction among different voters, they're going to lose. It did not work and it's gotten to the point, even this week, a lot of the vulnerable Democrats have come out and said basically to the DCCC and to their party leaders, "Stop it." It's a lot more than just saying Republicans are President Trump. We're failing to deliver on any of the issues that matter to voters and we need an agenda and we need policies that they actually care about because this formula is broken, is not working, and will not work moving forward.

Jim Tobin: To your point about the president's agenda, the party out of power from the White House, traditionally in a midterm election picks up on average 22 or 24 seats, I forget what exactly it is. So the odds are kind of in your favor but talk a little bit about redistricting, in particular, we've watched some states with GOP legislatures, they're drawing maps that are more favorable to Republicans and blue states are watching the exact same thing.

John Billings: Yeah.

Jim Tobin: Whether it's New York or California, Illinois, where they are kind of crushing the GOP districts and making their delegations more democratic to try to balance the scales. Tell me how you approach the redistricting issues over the next... The previous couple months but then moving into before the primary season.

John Billings: I would say redistricting is kind of playing out in a way that we predicted. The biggest challenge with redistricting has been the delays with the problems with the census. The fact that we still won't know truly what the map is until in some cases, March and finalized has really changed the playing field and kind of the strategy. But when I say it's happening like we expected, we expected one, Republicans were in a very good position to begin with in terms of the amount of maps that we have influence in creating. Everyone will argue and I will argue the maps that are being created are fair based on the state laws and other states. What you were seeing in Illinois, what we're seeing in Maryland, a lot has been made about the Texas map and the DOJ filing suit claiming that it unfairly is breaking up cities to try and dilute minority populations.

I hope they're doing the exact same thing in Maryland and Illinois. Because if you look at how they broke up the city of Baltimore and how they broke up Chicago and taken slivers of Chicago and then drew a district out 80 miles into a rural area, if they want to be consistent, they would be doing that. But what we're seeing is the floor for each party is going to be raised and the playing field in terms of competitive districts is kind of getting smaller. There's two things we have going for us. One, the Republicans are better prepared for redistricting than ever before. An entity was formed called the National Republican Redistricting Trust and it literally copies the entity that former President Obama and Eric Holder are running on the democratic side that the Democrats have had this mentality, we'd like to say, of sue until it's blue.

If you look at states like Florida, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, since the amount of lawsuits and changes to those maps since the lapse redistricting, it kind of plays out that way. We have an entity that's ready to fight the legal battles to defend fair maps, to challenge unfair maps when needed. But like I said, we're seeing the floor rise, the battlefield and the amount of competitive districts will shrink. That's what happened after the 2010 redistricting session. We're just kind of laser focused on, one, once we get a map it is to really ensure that we got the right candidates.

One thing we've been really proud of is our recruitment efforts. You go back to last cycle when we flipped 15 seats, every single seat that was flipped with either by a female, member of a minority community, and/or a veteran, the chairman had made it a priority and our leadership had made it a priority that we started having candidates that actually reflected what we knew the Republican party looked like, that we knew that actually looked like what people were seeing on their own main streets, and those should be their representatives. We're kind of focused on that. We're hoping that or we want redistrict, I want personally, redistricting to just get done with so that I actually know what the playing field is but we're in the spot we thought we'd be.

Jerry Howard: You mentioned the Republican party and the number of women and minorities that were elected last time. Can you talk a little bit about that in a little bit more detail because I read some interesting polling today that says that among Hispanics, right now, it's an exactly even split on those that consider themselves Republicans and those that consider themselves Democrats. That was kind of a surprise to me.

John Billings: Yeah. Well, what's very interesting, and obviously, we've been looking into a lot of that. We've been doing what we call our battleground polling which are issue polls that we do across 85 districts and these are districts where Biden won by five or Trump won by five and everything in between but where we see the majority won our loss. They're primarily a third Republican, third independents, third Democrat, so your swing of swing districts. To me, this will tie back into kind of what we're seeing with Hispanics but the issue... When you ask a Republican what their top issues are, it's been border security, jobs in the

economy, rising costs of goods. If you ask a Democrat what their top issues are, it's been healthcare, climate change, and usually a tie between COVID-19 concerns and jobs in the economy. If you ask an independent what their concerns are, it's jobs in the economy, rising costs of goods, government spending. All economic issues.

What we're seeing is, our issues are overlapping with what independents truly care about and the exact same thing is happening with a lot of Hispanic voters. I think Democrats have had the challenge lately of looking at the Hispanic community as a monolith and not really understanding what drives them and what really drives a lot of individuals in the Hispanic community is their ability to achieve the American dream.

They have a huge belief in American exceptionalism and they're seeing that ability to gain that or to gain their version of the American dream being taken away by some of the economic factors, some of the government spending, and the increased government programs and it's not what they want. We flipped two seats down in South Florida with Carlos Jimenez and Maria Salazar. Quite honestly, the messaging that worked down there was talking about socialism. You had communities of individuals and families that left their country, where they from because of socialism, to escape those kind of policies and here those are the things they're hearing about, talked about in the news by the democratic party, and that's not what they want. That's not why they came to this country.

Jerry Howard: Do you parse that kind of data and polling down into the various breakouts of the Hispanic community? Because I can see that being very important, obviously in South Florida with the Cuban Americans, does that same argument play in New York city with other types of Hispanics or in California in the west with Mexican Americans? Do you break it down in that level of detail?

John Billings: We will eventually because it goes back to the house race as being the largest local race. When we go into the district, we will find the messages that work best in the district that we are competing in. Last cycle, we flipped a seat in Oklahoma. The vast amount of messaging in that was about energy. Here you have, it's Stephanie Bice's seat, she defeated Kendra Horn. You had votes from Kendra Horn that hurt the oil and gas industry. Well, what are all the jobs in Oklahoma? It's all oil and gas. So whether it's with the Hispanic communities, whether it's with any other... We will find the data and crack down and understand the local issues that's going to drive voters in that district. We're not... That's another thing the chairman is very focused on when he came was, we do not do cookie cutter stuff here. We really look at what works in a district and is going to make a difference among those voters.

Jim Tobin: Yeah, I was going to say, John, what keeps you up at night? What are the things that you worry about, your plan doesn't ex... It results in winning back the majority.

John Billings: Probably the biggest thing that is keeping me up is this belief that it's almost... That the election has already happened. That people are... The house is going to flip and things are great. We still have 10 months so it's complacency that is keeping me up at night and that anyone would take something for granted. We're taking nothing for granted. I mean, we have not won anything yet. Like I said, we have 10 months until the election.

That is a message we're driving home with our members, with our team, of let's focus on what we can control. That's recruiting great candidates, helping them raise money to have the resources, and then let's stick to the messages we know voters care about. I think we've showed the video from Ronald Reagan in his first debate against Jimmy Carter. Just asking that question, do you think you're better off than you were four years ago? We can look at a lot of the issues, the rising costs of goods, every single time someone swipes their credit card at the grocery store right now they're reminded just how much inflation is impacting them and their family.

Jerry Howard: Let me ask the question a little bit differently. The headlines have been teetering toward two things. The first is, the Supreme court decision on Roe v. Wade and the second is a foreign affairs issue with the Russians amassing forces in the Ukraine or on the border of the Ukraine and the Chinese flying fighter formations over Taiwan. If Russia or China do make an aggressive action in one way or another, how does that impact the potential messaging that people are going to want to hear about? Perhaps more importantly and more to the point, when the Supreme court decides the abortion case, if it comes out in the more conservative vein, does that not become an electioneer issue and how will you guys handle that?

John Billings: I think a lot of those... I mean, it does go back to... It's hard to speculate exactly how individuals will react and how the public will react. I know with the foreign policy issues right now, there's a real challenge within the Biden administration and the themes that we've seen develop is that the American public do not believe Biden and the Democrats for competently running this country and do have extreme concerns about the way they've handled things.

It was exemplified by our withdrawal from Afghanistan. I think you look at polling and no one had a problem. I think it was 60% to almost 70% of the American people, supported the concept of leaving Afghanistan that we needed to end that war and they not see that as an issue but they did not want to see us leave in the manner that we did and the challenges and the tragedies that fell upon that departure quite honestly, playing all out on the news. As for the Supreme Court's decision, we'll let the courts make their case and it's going to be an issue that is going to be extremely important in some races and will allow our members to kind of decide what is best for them on that.

Jerry Howard: Jim, do you have any other questions?

- Jim Tobin: No, no, no. I was going to start to wrap up, Jerry. I think, John, we appreciate your time so much to come on with us.
- Jerry Howard: I don't want to step on your lines here, Jim, but we got to ask him for the prediction, the ultimate prediction.
- Jim Tobin: All right. Fair enough.
- John Billings: The ultimate prediction? We need five seats to get the majority. I guarantee those five seats and we'll let the voters decide how big that majority's going to be.
- Jerry Howard: There you go. All right then, I'm going to ask one more hypothetical question. A rumor that was floating around here today, that I read is that President Trump will run for speaker if the Republicans regain the majority, have you heard that? Do you give it any credence whatsoever if you have?
- John Billings: I have not heard that. I will be blunt and to say that I think, leader McCarthy has done an incredible job leading our conference and has earned the ability to be speaker and we want to deliver that speakership to him. He's helped raise a ton of money for the NRCC. He's helping our members and our candidates. He just announced a first group of eight young guns that he's endorsed. I've been really focused mostly on giving leader McCarthy the opportunity to become speaker and that's how I see it playing out.
- Jerry Howard: Fair enough.
- Jim Tobin: Well, we appreciate it, John. Thank you for coming on and visiting with Jerry and me today and giving us your insights in the elections upcoming. You certainly have your work cut out for you. You said, 10 months ago, there has been a lot being said that this is somehow a fait accompli but that's not the way the elections are run. As Jerry said, there's external factors that can happen. There's all kinds of stuff that can go right or wrong next 10 months. Wish you the best of luck-
- John Billings: Thank you.
- Jim Tobin: In your endeavor to take back the majority for the Republicans and I appreciate everything you do and your members do to support the housing industry.
- John Billings: No, thank you very much. I encourage all your members to go out and vote in 10 months and vote Republican.
- Jerry Howard: All right. Well, Merry Christmas, John. Thanks for everything. Let us know how we can help you.
- John Billings: Perfect. Thanks guys.



Jim Tobin: Thanks, John.

Jerry Howard: Interesting stuff, Jim. He's pretty confident that they're going to get at least the five seats they need.

Jim Tobin: Yeah, it's amazing. It shows. I think people underestimated the work that they did in the 2020 election that you had, obviously, the big ticket Trump-Biden campaign but the fact that the Democrats in the House were unable to expand on their majority with their top of the ticket winning but because the Democrats retained the majority in the House, no one really kind of looked at the numbers and the fact that they only need five seats to take back. As I said in the interview, traditionally the party out of power gains over 20 seats, John Billings' got to feel pretty good about things. I did enjoy his answer about the Trump as speaker. It's a theory so we'll see if that comes to fruition.

Jerry Howard: Well, it will be interesting. We didn't ask him how many Republican seats are vulnerable that they have to really put up a strong defense against but it didn't seem to matter. He thinks they're going to retake that House majority which is what he's supposed to think.

Jim Tobin: Yeah. That's right. That's right. That's his job.

Jerry Howard: And so, the time will tell. Jim, this is our last podcast before Christmas.

Jim Tobin: Yep.

Jerry Howard: I'd like to wish you and your family a very Merry Christmas and same to our listeners, happy holidays. We'll see you in 2022.

Jim Tobin: Merry Christmas to you and yours, Jerry. Enjoy the holidays and look forward to seeing you in early January.

Jerry Howard: Bye bye.

Jim Tobin: Take care.