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Assemblyman Michael Doherty kicks off social-conservative campaign against Sen. Marcia Karrow

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By **BILL WICHERT**

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Taking the first swing of this political season, state Assemblyman Michael Doherty hopes the sound reverberates with social conservatives.

Looking to unseat state Sen. Marcia Karrow in the June 2 primary, Doherty this week criticized the endorsement and campaign contributions given to Karrow by an organization supporting abortion-rights Republican female candidates.

"I think it's very important on these social issues that we have strong conservative leadership in Trenton," said Doherty, who opposes abortion.

Both 23rd Legislative District lawmakers are Republicans who represent Warren and Hunterdon counties.

Some political analysts were divided Wednesday on the weight such a moral argument carries.

Ingrid Reed, a policy analyst with the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, pointed to Republican gubernatorial frontrunner Chris Christie. He is a moderate, but it is abortion and other social issues that will most likely draw conservative Republicans to the polls, she said.

"It seems like it's a good strategy on his part," Reed said, referring to Doherty.

Those issues will appeal to some primary voters, but people across the state are primarily focused on improving the economy, said Ben Dworkin, director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University.

"It's the 800-pound gorilla in the room," Dworkin said of the economy. "That's the big issue, and you can't avoid it."

Doherty called on Karrow to return campaign contributions she received from the Women In the State and House, or WISH, List and its co-founder.

The Virginia-based organization donated \$2,000 to Karrow's 2001 primary bid for the New Jersey Assembly and \$1,000 to her 2005 campaign, according to state election reports. Candace Straight, the past president and co-founder of WISH List, made a \$2,200 donation to Karrow in 2001, according to election reports.

Karrow favors the right to have an abortion but opposes so-called partial-birth abortion and favors a waiting period and parental notification, according to her spokeswoman, Lisa Bialoskurski. Karrow also opposes public funding for abortions, the spokeswoman said.

The senator doesn't plan on returning the campaign contributions, Bialoskurski said.

Karrow did not return a call seeking comment.

As she heads into the primary race, Karrow plans to focus primarily on the economy, Bialoskurski said. Karrow defeated Doherty in a January convention to fill the vacant Senate seat of U.S. Rep. Leonard Lance, R-Hunterdon.

"She has an extremely effective record in the Legislature of being a strong fiscal conservative," Bialoskurski said. Doherty's criticism is "just sort of political gamesmanship. He's attacking fellow Republicans in a

primary, instead of talking about the issues."

Doherty said he believes being socially and fiscally conservative goes hand in hand, and Republican voters want the entire package.

"The 23rd Legislative District is a very pro-life district," Doherty said. "Elections are about drawing distinctions between candidates."

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