

The Charlotte Observer

Democrats attack Hayes over CAFTA
Hayes voted no, then cast decisive vote for trade pact

By Jim Morrill and Tim Funk

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Democrats were quick to attack Rep. Robin Hayes Thursday over his last-minute change of heart in casting the decisive vote for the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

"Deja vu ... 8th District Constituents Sold Out AGAIN," headlined a press release from the N.C. Democratic Party.

Hayes walked onto the floor intending to vote "no" Wednesday night but changed his vote to "yes." It proved deciding. The measure passed by two votes; if he or any other yes vote had gone the other way, the vote would have been tied -- and the measure defeated.

Hayes cast a similar tie-breaking vote in 2001 that gave the president so-called fast Track Trading Authority. He said he voted then with tears in his eyes.

Hayes said he switched on CAFTA after administration assurances about provisions that would benefit workers in his district, which reaches from Charlotte to Fayetteville.

Last week he told the Observer he was "flat-out, completely, horizontally opposed to CAFTA." Earlier this month he said "There is no way I could vote for CAFTA." Before the vote, he told a

radio reporter "a `no' vote on CAFTA is the right vote for me."

Hayes first voted no. He later switched after House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., came to him in the House cloak room to see what it would take to get him to vote yes.

"He said, `You tell me what you need and we're going to do it,' " Hayes told the Observer.

Then, after the midnight vote, Hayes said he talked for an hour or so with Rob Portman, the Bush administration's trade representative, about things that could be done to help besieged textile mills in North Carolina.

"We're still working on" the specifics of what to ask Portman to do, though Hayes said none of the promises made to him had to do with changing the already negotiated CAFTA.

Hayes spent Thursday morning calling textile employers in his district who had lobbied him to vote against CAFTA and asking them what they wanted Hastert and the Bush administration to do for the industry.

As recently as last week, Hayes told the Observer he was "flat-out, completely, horizontally opposed to CAFTA."

All day Wednesday, Hayes and his office were telling reporters -- from The Observer, from a Charlotte radio station -- that he was still strongly opposed to the trade agreement.

Asked about charges from Democrats that his late yes vote made him a flip-

flopper, Hayes said he changed to help protect jobs in his district.

"Any time I make a decision, any time I cast a vote, it is in light of what's best for my district, my people, jobs in North Caroliana," he said. "Here was a classic example and a rare opportunity to do something . . . really, really significant for the people back home, to improve their lives."

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