

By J.D. Prose

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U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township, lost to U.S. Rep. Mark Critz, D-12, Johnstown, in a heated primary battle for the newly drawn 12th Congressional District. Last week, though, Altmire's office announced that by the time he leaves office next month he will have returned more than \$1 million in unspent office funds.

"I just felt that we were really stewards of the taxpayers' money," Altmire said Sunday. Many legislators, he said, have the attitude of use it-or-lose it when it comes to their office budgets.

In fact, a former colleague told Altmire to do just that when he was first elected in 2006. "I would not give that same advice," Altmire said.

Altmire, though, said he never felt as if his office funds were his to spend frivolously when he could show financial responsibility. Returning the money, he said, "sends a message" to the public and colleagues.

When he leaves after this term, he will return anywhere from \$350,000 to \$400,000, Altmire said. That, he noted, was after House office budgets were already reduced by 11 percent.

Office funds can be spent on rent, staff salaries and bonuses, equipment and mailings, said a release from Altmire's office. Asked if his tight purse strings affected his staff, Altmire said he always seemed to have satisfied employees who stayed with him.

"I tried to be fair," he said, "but, again, I know this is taxpayer money."