

Who will be the next player in the Governor's seat?

By MICHELLE SAXTON
DAILY MAIL CAPITOL REPORTER

While it is a good three and a half years before the next gubernatorial election, published reports and general buzz have fueled speculation about several possible contenders.

Some already have confirmed their future intentions.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Jeff Kessler has filed pre-candidacy papers for 2012, and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Walt Helmick said he has interest and plans to file pre-candidacy papers later this year.

Such a filing allows a candidate to begin raising money for a race.

State Treasurer John Perdue spent the month of May touring the state to talk about the services offered by his office.

Perdue said people have talked to him about running and he was flattered to hear his name mentioned but he is concentrating on

how to solve problems from the financial crisis and help West Virginia industries and people affected by it.

"I haven't filed any papers," Perdue said. "It's only been about six months since I've been reelected."

Running for governor would be a big commitment and family decision, and there is much to consider before crossing that bridge, Perdue said.

But if the opportunity opened up in the future, Perdue said he would be prepared.

"I've been in government a long time and I understand the operation," Perdue said. "I believe in education and I believe in technology."

"I'm not to going to rule it out," Perdue said. "It's something that every young man or young lady aspires to do."

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Several high-ranking officials already making moves



KEVIN CADE/DAILY MAIL

(Continued from above article)

Kessler, D-Marshall, filed in April so he can form an exploratory committee and see what statewide support he can get. He has made trips to the Eastern Panhandle and north central West Virginia and plans to visit other areas of the state.

Kessler said he may begin trying to raise money as early as this summer.

"I'd rather start a year early than a year late," Kessler said.

Helmick, who described himself as a fiscal conservative, said his current priority is to be a good senator but even considering a run for governor is a significant step that requires early planning.

"You would have to give it the necessary time," he said.

Manchin can't run

Gov. Joe Manchin just started his second term in office and cannot run for a third consecutive term under state law, so the position is up for grabs in 2012.

West Virginia has a popular lame-duck governor with no heir apparent, said Robert Rupp, professor of history and political science at West Virginia Wesleyan College. Because of that, a lot of ambitious politicians at the statehouse have announced or indicated their interest, creating a big field at a surprisingly early time, he said.

"It's interesting, but highly speculative," Rupp said. "I'd caution against any serious handicapping on who has a lead."

Because of the nature of politics, people have to raise money early -- and lots of it -- which helps create buzz, Rupp said.

There is a chicken-and-egg scenario, Rupp said, because money to some extent gives credibility to candidates, but candidates need credibility to raise money.

And money, like polls, is a way to measure candidates, Rupp said.

"They're raising money not just to have it there, to spend on elections and hire aides and consultants, they're also raising money because it's a standard," Rupp said. "It looks good."

Also, West Virginia is a small state, so with a crowded field for governor, money resources could be limited, Rupp said.

Tomblin is interested

Other state lawmakers who have been mentioned as possible candidates include Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin, D-Logan; House Speaker Rick Thompson, D-Wayne; and Senate Education Committee Chairman Robert Plymale, also D-Wayne.

"Am I interested in running for governor in 2012? The answer would be, yes, I am," said Tomblin, who has spent 35 years in the Legislature, with the last 15 as Senate president.

"It's a little early. But actually sitting here and holding the title of lieutenant governor, I definitely do have interest."

"As far as being able to run the state, I probably know as much or more than anybody in the state about what government operates," Tomblin added.

Tomblin said he would not make a formal announcement or file pre-candidacy papers any time soon but said he planned to start fundraising shortly.

"I've got a nice little nest egg," Tomblin said. "It's going to take a lot of money, being an expensive race."

Thompson said he felt humbled that his name was circulated but would not make a decision until he had time to reflect after the recent extended and special sessions.

"Those types of campaigns are expensive... It takes a lot of time," Thompson said. "I will, after the session, continue to talk with other people and make that determination at some later date once I have the ability to totally concentrate on that issue."

Plymale also said he had not made a decision.

"I've had some people contact me and I'm still considering it," Plymale said. "We've made a lot of progress, and I feel like I've been a part of that progress, and I want to continue to keep up the good work."

Capito has options

From the Republican party, U.S. Rep. Shelley Moore Capito has been mentioned as a possible contender, as has former West Virginia Secretary of State Betty Ireland.

It basically comes down to whether Capito decides to run for governor or if she waits to eventually run for U.S. Senate, Rupp said, adding that decision will not come until much closer to 2012.

Since Capito is up for reelection to Congress in 2010, "she has the luxury of waiting, not having to decide where she wants to compete," Rupp said. "But the other candidates don't have that luxury because they face that competitive field."

Capito's focus now is her work in Congress, said Jonathan Coffin,

her press secretary. She is concentrating on issues such as energy independence, infrastructure and fiscal discipline.

"We're talking about something in 2012," Coffin said. "Political considerations can wait."

Ireland, who just left public office, said she is quite content returning to the private sector and will stay there for the foreseeable future. She started in April as a business and management consultant in Charleston for Morgantown-based Performance Results Corp.

"I am not focused on returning to politics, but I'm not ruling that out," Ireland said. "Whether that would be the governorship or something else, I don't know."

Ireland decided against running for re-election so she could care for her 94-year-old parents during their final years.

"I made that decision quite easily and willingly," Ireland said. "There's always another time to run a campaign."

"One day in politics is an eternity," Ireland said. "So three years is light years away from what the current situation is now."

In American politics, potential candidates often declare early because they believe it is advantageous to get their name out and jump to an early lead, Rupp said.

"There may be a tendency among them or their supporters to think that if they get more visibility this early in the campaign it will help them in their campaign by making them the front runner or scaring off some candidates," Rupp said. "I don't know if that's going to work."

Tennant won't rule it out

Meanwhile, Natalie Tennant, West Virginia's new secretary of state, also has been included in the mix of possible Democratic contenders for governor.

Secretary of state is the position Manchin held before running for governor in 2004.

While Tennant said she was honored her name was mentioned and would not rule out the idea, she noted she had been secretary of state for only months and that position is her priority.

"I intend to do a good job as secretary of state, and that's certainly what we're striving for right now," Tennant said. "We're cutting costs, we're being more efficient and the staff is really coming together, and so that's my focus right now.

"I've got to do a good job to then deserve another chance at re-election or something else," Tennant said.

State Auditor Glen Gainer also has been mentioned as a possible gubernatorial candidate.

But Gainer said he had not given the race much thought and that if he had to file now it would be for state auditor again.

"I haven't achieved the goals I would like to achieve as auditor, and I'm focused on doing that and doing the best job I can for the people," Gainer said.

Newcomer could emerge

With so many names already in the mix, West Virginia can expect a close, competitive Democratic primary, Rupp said. But like the Kentucky Derby, it also opens up the possibility of an unexpected competitor, he said.

Rupp compared current times to about 20 years ago when potential candidates for governor began expressing interest early. Then a non-politician, private businessman Gaston Caperton, came out of nowhere and defeated former House Speaker Clyde See in the Democratic gubernatorial primary before being elected as West Virginia's governor, he said.

"There's always that Caperton factor," Rupp said. "We don't find ourselves in this position very often, with so many possible candidates."

Generational considerations and personality are other possible factors, Rupp said.

Power could be passed to a new, younger generation of voters, not just in the governor's race but in other races as well, Rupp said.

"That's another reason 2012 seems to be capturing interest," Rupp said. "I think the torch could be passed."

Besides polling and money, West Virginia values personalities and personal relations when it comes to public office, Rupp said.

"That's our saying -- everything in West Virginia is political except for politics, which is personal," Rupp said. "People often remember much about politics and forgive nothing."

Rupp likened West Virginia's politics to an independent hardware store in small-town America as compared to national "Wal-Mart" politics.

"What are your polls?" would be the first question with "Wal-Mart" politics in big states, whereas in West Virginia it would be who you know, who likes you and who does not like you, Rupp

said.

Candidates' platforms or policies are factors as well. Candidates may either play the status quo with no initiatives so as to avoid any liabilities, Rupp said, "or it could make one of the possible candidates come out with a bold initiative, in order to stand out among the crowd."

Manchin not ready to quit

Meanwhile, Manchin still has his office -- and the state -- to run.

"It's not helping Manchin's record or legacy to spend four years talking about who might be his successor," Rupp said.

Manchin said that was not a concern but added the state cannot allow its progress to get caught in the turmoil of a speculative election three and a half years in the future.

"Let the games begin after the 2010 election, seriously," Manchin said. "If we adopt bad public policy or we're afraid to take up good public policy because of someone's popularity, it's wrong.

"I'm going to do this job until the last minute I'm here," Manchin said. "I would say to all those wonderful people who have a desire to serve at this level, 'God bless each and every one of you.' It's a long road."

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