

With Duffy out, wide GOP field could emerge for U.S. Senate race

Posted on Friday, Feb 17, 2017

As potential GOP candidates weigh their options, Dems are predicting a “circus” will emerge on the Republican side against U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, now that U.S. Rep. Sean Duffy won’t run against her next year.

Duffy, R-Wausau, announced Thursday he’s passing on a challenge of the first-term Madison Dem.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, has said he would wait for Duffy to make a decision before seriously looking at the race. He did not return messages left on his cell phone Thursday, but tweeted, “I know this was a difficult decision by [@RepSeanDuffy](#) and am confident Wisconsin will continue to benefit from his leadership in [@HouseGOP](#).” Fitzgerald warned last week at a WisPolitics.com luncheon that Republicans must avoid a crowded primary like 2012, when Tommy Thompson emerged with little money.

Fellow GOP Sen. Leah Vukmir said she was seriously considering the race even before Duffy dropped out. She said Fitzgerald’s decision wouldn’t impact whether she gets into the race. She also said having to give up her seat wouldn’t be a factor.

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Vukmir, R-Brookfield, said all the candidates will have to determine if they can put together a team and have the ability to raise money for a top-tier race.

“I’m going to continue going about my process about my decision of getting into the race,” Vukmir said, adding she has no deadline to make a decision. “I believe Wisconsin needs a consistently strong conservative voice who has a record of delivering on those issues, and I think I can do that.”

Others who have been mentioned as possible candidates include 2012 Senate candidate Eric Hovde, state Rep. and Joint Finance Committee member Dale Kooyenga and former Marine Kevin Nicholson, who's now a management consultant.

Nicholson tweeted that he and his family are "strongly considering" a U.S. Senate bid.

"Here in Wisconsin, we've had too many years of career politician Tammy Baldwin," he wrote. "I'm an outsider, and I know firsthand the challenges facing Wisconsin families, and the sacrifices made by those who help keep us safe."

Kooyenga, a member of the Joint Finance Committee, said he would not make a decision until after the state budget is done.

"That's what I'm focused on," said Kooyenga, R-Brookfield. "After we get those objectives done in this budget, I'll talk to some more people and make a decision. There definitely are some people who are strong stakeholders who are every encouraging."

There also has been an effort to persuade Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke to get into the race. Conservative activists Eric O'Keefe, an informal adviser to Clarke, said the sheriff hasn't given the possibility much thought.

"He has not been taking action toward a Senate run," O'Keefe said. "But he hasn't said no way."

Gillian Drummond, a Dem Party spokeswoman who's focusing on the Senate race, tweaked Republicans about the possibility of a wide-open primary.

"With out-of-state money piling up to support Tea Party darling David Clarke, legislators across the state preparing to run, and their top candidate dropping out, the Republican establishment in Washington is scrambling to avoid a divisive, messy Republican primary in Wisconsin," she wrote in an email. "No matter what circus emerges, Tammy Baldwin will continue to stand up to the powerful interests in Washington and fight for a Wisconsin economy that works for everyone, not just those at the top."