

Governor Ritter vows swift replacement for Salazar

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

(AP)—Colorado Democrats are scrambling at the prospect of a Senate vacancy to be filled in coming weeks by Gov. Bill Ritter, even though the governor has not revealed how he plans to replace Sen. Ken Salazar, who is leaving to become Interior Secretary under President-elect Barack Obama.

Pending Senate confirmation, Salazar's exit will leave two years on a seat Democrats had hoped Salazar could easily defend. Now Ritter, a fellow Democrat, must name someone he thinks can keep the seat in party hands.

The state's longest-serving Democrat in Congress, Rep. Diana DeGette of Denver, told reporters Wednesday she talked with Ritter about taking Salazar's spot even before Obama made the announcement Wednesday.

DeGette, careful to say she's only talking about the job, not actively promoting herself for it, told reporters Ritter didn't say how long he'll take.

"In the end we're going to have to figure out who best can represent the state over the next two years and then who can get re-elected in 2010," said DeGette. She predicted the candidate would need to raise \$10 million to \$15 million to defend the seat.

Also talking about the job is Rep. Ed Perlmutter, a Democrat from Denver's western suburbs who is headed into his third term in the House. Perlmutter's spokeswoman, Leslie Oliver, confirmed Perlmutter wants the Senate spot but added he didn't know when or how Ritter will decide.

Salazar won't leave his seat until the Senate confirms his nomination. That could take several weeks, and Salazar's aides say the senator won't talk publicly about what Ritter should do.

In a statement, Salazar's aides said simply, "Gov. Ritter will have several great candidates to choose from." They did not say whether Salazar had any interest in pushing his brother, Rep. John Salazar, from Colorado's Western Slope.

Other potential candidates include Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper and term-limited Colorado House Speaker Andrew Romanoff.

The process of gubernatorial Senate appointments is under special scrutiny after federal authorities accused Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich of seeking bribes in exchange for Obama's seat.

In New York, where Sen. Hillary Clinton is departing the Senate to be Obama's Secretary of State, Gov. David Paterson has said he won't name a replacement until she's also confirmed.

Ritter named a panel to weigh candidates for another opening he must fill, as Republican Secretary of State Mike Coffman leaves to take office in the U.S. House. DeGette said Ritter told her there wouldn't be a similar panel seated to find a Salazar replacement. Aides to the governor didn't immediately respond to questions about the process.

For Republicans forlorn after a brutal campaign season that saw them lose several high-profile Colorado races, the Salazar vacancy gives them a measure of optimism.

State GOP chairman Dick Wadhams said expected Republican challengers would wait to see who Ritter names before deciding whether to enter the race. But Wadhams said the race would be tantalizing.

Despite their losses, Republicans voted in greater numbers than Democrats in November, though an independent swing toward Democrats turned the state their way.

Wadhams said the GOP is confident any Salazar successor would be easier to beat than Salazar himself.

"Whoever he appoints will be someone we can win against," Wadhams said.