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An inclination to color outside party lines

SALEM - No other Republican legislator in the Capitol had a week like Sen. Ben Westlund of Tumalo.

On Tuesday, the Central Oregon lawmaker and two Democratic colleagues filed a ballot initiative declaring that affordable health care is "a fundamental right."

On Wednesday, Westlund joined Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski at a rally with a union-backed group fighting the pharmaceutical industry over expanding a drug-purchasing pool.

And on Thursday, the Bend Bulletin newspaper reported that conservative activists might try to recall Westlund because of his ardent support for civil unions.

Westlund has his Republican side, too, as you'll learn if you talk to the NRA. But Westlund, more than any other legislator this session, routinely defies party lines.

Not long ago, this would be unremarkable. Republicans such as Gov. Tom McCall and Sen. Mark Hatfield once dominated state politics from the broad middle.

But the widening partisan split and the growing reliance on special interest campaign cash has increasingly forced legislators to stick close to their party caucuses.

Westlund is now the biggest exception to the rule. He's often been the sole Republican voting for Democratic bills, ranging from the drug-purchasing plan to collective bargaining rights.

He's berated legislators of both stripes for failing to tackle tax reform. And he's not afraid to use talk about a sales tax.

"Common sense would tell you that living in the middle -- being a moderate -- would be the most secure political ground," he says. "Regrettably that's not true anymore. It's the extremes that have the most political protection."

Westlund, 55, has always been a contrarian. The self-described black sheep of a well-to-do family, he made his way to Central Oregon where he helped found a company that sold diatomaceous earth, used in cat box litter among other things. Later, he went into the cattle-breeding business, cold-calling ranchers to sell bull semen.

Westlund won a House seat in 1996 and quickly showed he had a knack for

understanding complex issues and for developing relations on both sides of the aisle. He became the House budget chief in 2001. He may have been independent, but he was also a key insider.

Later that year, the economy tanked and sent the budget into a tailspin. Westlund was in the front lines of fashioning a tax package that voters later rejected.

In 2003, the new House Speaker Karen Minnis, R-Wood Village, shunted Westlund aside and gave the budget position to a reliable conservative.

Just a few months later, Westlund was diagnosed with lung cancer. Still weak from surgery and chemotherapy, Westlund returned to give a fiery speech demanding that legislators fix Oregon's boom-and-bust tax system "right here on this floor, right now."

That didn't happen, but Westlund and a group of fellow Republican moderates -- called the "usual suspects" -- joined Democrats to pass another temporary tax increase. Voters shot that down, too.

Westlund was appointed to a Senate vacancy in late 2003. He says he's regaining much of his precancer ebullience. But the experience clearly changed him.

He wakes up blessing his family and the simple fact he's alive. "After that, the politics in this building, they pale in comparison"

His passion for universal access to health care has deepened. Human suffering, he says, "is bad enough, but unnecessary suffering is even worse."

Like most legislators, Westlund thinks of higher office. Unlike most, he doesn't rule out the idea of running as an independent. That might be his only alternative, given his increasing estrangement from the Republican base.

Or he might stay in the Senate.

"If the Senate is any closer (between the Democrats and Republicans) next time, his vote could become very critical," says Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland, one Westlund ally. "If I were the Democratic leader of a 16-14 Senate, Ben would have a chairmanship."

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