

the SOURCE

WEEKLY

EDITORIAL

NOVEMBER 17, 2005

Why Ben Should Run

Ben Westlund, the independent-minded (some would say "maverick") Republican state senator from the Bend area, has earned a reputation for shaking things up in the legislature.

Right now Westlund is shaking things up on the statewide political scene by giving strong indications that he'll run for governor as an independent in 2006.

We hope he does.

That doesn't mean we're endorsing Westlund at this point. We don't even know who his opponents will be if he does run. Incumbent Democrat Ted Kulongoski faces several strong challengers and potential challengers, including popular former Gov. John Kitzhaber. And while he's still considered the Republican frontrunner, Kevin Mannix--who's already lost twice to Democratic candidates--is in a contested race too.

We're encouraging Westlund to run because, first, he's a breath of fresh air in a political atmosphere that has been polluted for too long by petty partisanship, and, second, because a strong run by an independent would send a message to the two major parties that they're out of touch with mainstream Oregonians and they'd better get their act together or be reduced to irrelevancy.

A win by Westlund, or any independent, would be a long shot but by no means an impossibility: Think of Jesse Ventura in Minnesota.

On second thought, scratch that. Ben Westlund is not a former pro wrestler who became famous by prancing around in a pink feather boa; he's a serious and seasoned politician with a strong track record in Salem and a clear understanding of the state's problems.

His record is that of a lawmaker who's able to work both sides of the aisle to forge consensus. He's also proven that he's guided by principle rather than party loyalty or dogmatic ideology. A prime example was his gutsy support for SB 1000, which would have allowed civil unions for same-sex couples.

In an interview with the Source Weekly, Westlund demonstrated his grasp of the core problem confronting Oregon: the lack of a stable revenue source. Until the state stops relying almost exclusively on the personal income tax, all of its other problems--education, health care, public safety--will remain intractable.

On this and other crucial issues, Kulongoski has been--to use Westlund's term--AWOL. Oregonians can't--and, we believe, won't--tolerate four more years of a leadership vacuum in the governor's office. Nor are most of them enthusiastic about Mannix's brand of right-wing extremism. That explains why there's so much statewide interest in a Westlund candidacy--and why Westlund might have a legitimate shot.

He should take that shot. Win or lose, we believe Oregon politics will be better because of it.

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