

## Westlund to run for governor as independent

Senator leaves GOP and says partisanship has damaged Oregon

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*Correction: Because of a reporter's error, the original version of this story reported the incorrect year that Sen. Ben Westlund entered the Oregon House of Representatives. The correct year was 1997. This is the corrected version.*

Bend-area lawmaker and political maverick Ben Westlund shook up the Oregon governor's race Tuesday by dropping his Republican Party affiliation and entering the race as an independent.

Westlund said voters are tired of political partisanship and the gridlock it spawns in state government. He promised to crusade for solutions to nagging problems in areas where progress has been stalled in Salem, such as unstable government funding and a rising number of people without health coverage.

"We are where we are -- mired in mediocrity -- because extreme partisan politics all too often trumps good public policy," Westlund said at a Capitol news conference to announce his plans.

"Not so long ago, Oregon had the highest rates of literacy, home ownership and number of insured in the nation," Westlund said. "Today, over 600,000 of our citizens don't have health insurance and over 10,000 Oregon children will go to bed hungry. We have one of the shortest school years in the nation, and home prices are outpacing wages."

Westlund, 56, struck it rich in the cattle-breeding industry. He entered the state House of Representatives in 1997 and won a four-year state Senate term in 2004 after being appointed to a vacant seat there in 2003.

Political analysts said the timing could be good for an independent to make a splash in Oregon. Voters are disenchanted with political infighting and malaise, and Oregonians are anxious about the rising cost of living despite the recovery from recession.

But only one independent ever has captured the Oregon governor's race: Julius Meier, in 1930. Westlund's greatest impact could be as a "spoiler," siphoning votes that would otherwise go the Democratic and Republican candidates.

"He's just not very well-known in the state," said James Moore, a political scientist at Pacific University in Forest Grove. "He's not going to have the backing of any of the money that you would normally get from the parties themselves."

Westlund, who is independently wealthy, said Tuesday that he doesn't intend to bankroll his own campaign.

Republican political consultant Chuck Adams said he doubts that Westlund will be much of a factor, saying money is needed to deliver one's message.

"He needs a million dollars to be able to be noticed," Adams said.

Qualifying for the ballot as an independent also got much tougher in Oregon with the passage of House Bill 2614 last year. Henceforth, nominating petitions for independent candidates may be signed only by independent voters or those who don't vote in a partisan primary.

Westlund needs to get more than 18,000 nominating-petition signatures from fellow independents by Aug. 29.

In the Legislature, Westlund has acted more like the liberal Oregon Republicans of the 1960s and 1970s than the conservatives who have dominated the party for two decades. He supports a sales tax, voted for tax increases and campaigned for gay

### Who's in the race

Here are the major candidates now in the race for governor. The filing deadline is March 7.

#### DEMOCRATS

Gov. Ted Kulongoski

Former state Treasurer Jim Hill

Lane County Commissioner Pete Sorenson

#### REPUBLICANS

Former Oregon Republican Party Chairman Kevin Mannix

Portland corporate lawyer Ron Saxton

State Sen. Jason Atkinson, R-Central Point

#### INDEPENDENTS

State Sen. Ben Westlund, I-Tumalo

rights. He was instrumental in fending off cuts to the Oregon Health Plan and crusaded for the Oregon Cultural Trust, which raises money for the arts. That has widened Westlund's appeal beyond his base in Deschutes County and among moderate Republicans.

After a recent meeting with Westlund, Democratic political consultant Geoff Sugerman became a believer in Westlund and his chances to win.

"It's a moment in time where it's right for a third-party candidate to capture the imagination of the Oregon people," said Sugerman, who lives in Silverton.

It's unclear whether Westlund will draw more votes from Democrats or Republicans.

Moore, the political scientist, said Westlund could hurt Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski and Republican Ron Saxton if they win their respective primaries. Both, like Westlund, are viewed as political moderates. Moore doubts that Westlund will attract many supporters of social conservative Kevin Mannix if he wins the GOP primary.

Kulongoski's campaign team said it was not concerned by Westlund's entry.

"Our polling shows that Ted's lead is actually larger when Westlund's in the race," said Lisa Grove, Kulongoski's pollster.

Cameron Johnson, Kulongoski's campaign manager, pointed out that Westlund served as Mannix's campaign chairman in the 2002 governor's race.

"It looks like there's going to be two Republican candidates in the general election against the governor," Johnson said.

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