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EDITORIAL

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The more the merrier

A year from now Oregon voters may look at their choices for governor as a scoop of vanilla or a second scoop of vanilla. But there is a possibility that voters could see state Sen. Ben Westlund on the ballot as an independent.

He is a whole other flavor.

Westlund is a left-leaning Republican with rural roots, a love of politics and a quirky, independent record. Is Oregon ready for a governor who speaks with equal passion for gun rights and the civil rights of homosexuals?

In any scenario, a Westlund candidacy would be a long shot. He is unknown outside his home in the Central Oregon community of Tumalo, and his home away from home, the state Capitol. But it would sure be interesting -- and not just for the reporters who trailed him -- if Westlund did run for governor.

Westlund is a lung cancer survivor. He had surgery two years ago, and says recent tests have shown him to be free of the disease. He came back from cancer with less patience than ever for partisan politics as usual. Today he is the nearest facsimile in Oregon politics to the mythical beast that independent voters often tell

pollsters they are looking for: a pro-education, pro-business moderate willing to buck his party.

Westlund has credentials. He's a former co-chairman of the Legislature's budget-writing Ways and Means Committee. He's as knowledgeable as anyone on tax and budget issues, and on Oregon's troubled health care system.

But he's been on the losing side of every recent tax debate. He's tilted at the windmills of tax reform and full funding for schools. He has so infuriated conservatives by supporting civil unions for gays and lesbians that some of his constituents are talking recall.

Westlund has no chance of emerging from a Republican primary in a state where GOP voters keep stubbornly nominating conservatives -- Kevin Mannix, Bill Sizemore and Denny Smith -- and keep losing to Democrats.

Yet Westlund could go his own way as an independent candidate. It would be a bold step, an unlikely campaign unpopular with his party.

It sounds just like Ben Westlund.

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