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## Scramble to replace Giffords spawns new and old names

by Jeremy Duda

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Missing Plug-in

Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, left, accompanied by her husband, former astronaut Mark Kelly, reacts after leading the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of a memorial vigil remembering the victims and survivors one year after the Arizona congresswoman was wounded in a shooting that killed six others, Sunday, Jan. 8, 2012, in Tucson, Ariz. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin)

U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords' surprise announcement on Sunday that she would resign from Congress leaves prospective candidates with an extremely short timeframe to decide their political futures.

Giffords, who is recovering from a gunshot wound to the head she suffered in an assassination attempt on Jan. 8, 2011, is expected to officially step down after President Barack Obama's State of the Union address on Tuesday.

Candidates will have just 30 days to gather signatures and get their campaigns organized for the special election in the 8th Congressional District. Gov. Jan Brewer must call a primary election for 80 to 90 days after the resignation, and the special election will be 50 to 60 days later.

Lawmakers who have long been rumored to be eying Giffords' seat hedged their bets in the wake of her sudden announcement, but a roster of prospective candidates quickly emerged. And new names swirled as the fallout continued.

Sen. Paula Aboud and Rep. Steve Farley, both Democrats, said they were considering a run, while another Democrat, Rep. Matt Heinz, wouldn't comment on his possible candidacy, despite persistent chatter for much of the past year that he would be in the running.

Republican Sen. Frank Antenori too said he would wait until after Giffords officially resigned before announcing his plans. Arizona Wildcats broadcaster Dave Sitton, a Republican, did not return a message from the Arizona Capitol Times. Sitton formed an exploratory committee in November, saying Giffords' decision would be one of the primary factors in his decision.

Aboud said today she was considering a run for the seat, but would have to determine if that's the best way to serve her community. Aboud, who is termed out in the Senate, said she will resign her seat if she runs.

"I haven't made any decisions," Aboud said. "I'll make it when it feels like the right decision."

Farley said he might also run, but only if he has Giffords' endorsement, which he said he wouldn't actively seek. "If she believes I can carry on her legacy the best, I will run," he said.

Heinz released a statement lamenting the announcement as a sad day for Arizona and wishing Giffords a full recovery, but he refused to say whether he was considering a run for her seat.

Antenori said he wouldn't announce his plans until after Giffords officially resigns. He said the decision is complicated by the fact that a candidate for the Tucson-based seat would have to run two separate campaigns, and questioned whether it might be better to only run in one of the elections.

"We're going to make a cool, calm, calculated decision," Antenori said.

Two former campaign staffers for Jesse Kelly, the Republican who narrowly lost to Giffords in 2010, said Kelly is considering another run for the seat.

Former Sen. Jonathan Paton, who lost the 2010 primary to Kelly, said he is also considering it, though he is also eying the 1st Congressional District, where incumbent GOP Congressman Paul Gosar recently announced that he would run for reelection in a neighboring district.

Another potential Democratic candidate is Nan Walden, an environmental attorney who helps run a Sahuarita pecan farm. Walden flirted with a U.S. Senate run in 2010, but decided to stay out of the race. A spokesman for Walden said she is not prepared to make a decision on the congressional race yet.

And Tucson defense contractor David Crowe, who was previously exploring a run for U.S. Senate, might also jump into the race for Giffords' seat. Crowe, who is also considering challenging U.S. Rep. Raul Grijalva in the Democratic primary, said he is weighing his options and will announce his plans by the end of the week.

One of the biggest questions of the race, aside from who will actually run, is whether Giffords will endorse a candidate.

Sen. Linda Lopez, D-Tucson, a close friend of Giffords', said she believes the congresswoman and husband Mark Kelly may endorse, depending on who gets into the race. But they also may stay out of the primary if a preferred candidate doesn't jump in, she said.

"They were being very close to the vest with those names (Sunday)," Lopez said.

Giffords spokesman Mark Kimble said he didn't know whether Giffords planned to endorse anyone.

Democratic lobbyist Mario Diaz said Giffords' endorsement would be a boon to any Democratic candidate.

"I don't think it would clear the field, but it would have an immense impact on one's ability to win that race," Diaz said. "Whoever wins this election is going to be representing Gabby, in essence, for a very long time. It's going to be a unique congressional seat."

The timing of the special election poses new challenges for candidates. The primary for the new 2nd Congressional District, the successor to CD8, will be in August, and candidates will have to decide whether they want to run in both elections. Doing that would require them to win four elections in eight months.

Bruce Ash, a Republican national committeeman from Tucson, said the timing of the special election could be a problem for Sitton. Ash said Sitton, a longtime friend, said Sitton is contracted to broadcast for Wildcats basketball through the end of the season, which wouldn't have hindered a run for CD2 but could pose problems for a special election campaign.

Antenori and others questioned whether it would be best to skip the special election and run only in the general election, but Ash said such a strategy could backfire.

While CD8 has a slight GOP edge – Republican registration is 37 percent of the district compared to the Democrats' 31.9 percent – the new CD2 is split almost evenly. Republicans have just a 3.5 percent registration advantage, and their performance advantage in the new district is less than ½ percent.

"CD8 is a better district for us," Ash said. "I think that we're in as good a position as we could be to regain the seat and ultimately the CD2 election in the fall, having an incumbent in place."

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