

Candidates to replace former Rep. Chris Lee emerge

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Serious contenders for an open seat in the 26th Congressional District emerged Thursday as the political world shook off its shock that Rep. Chris Lee had abruptly resigned.

Republicans, who have a distinct enrollment advantage in the district, appeared to be coalescing around Assemblywoman Jane Corwin of Clarence, Erie County, though Sen. George Mazarz had also been talking to party leaders in an effort to build support.

Lee, of Amherst, resigned Wednesday within hours of the publication of e-mail messages and a shirtless photo Lee had apparently taken of himself that appeared on the gossip website Gawker .com. Lee, who is married, never commented on the authenticity of the e-mails, which were reported to be between him and a single 34-year-old woman who had advertised in the "Women seeking men" section of the website Craigslist.

In front of reporters in Washington, Speaker John Boehner, who had raised money for Lee, said the decision to resign was Lee's.

"Congressman Lee made his own decision, which he thought was in his best interest and in the best interest of his family," Boehner said. "I believe members of Congress should be held to the highest ethical standards. It's what the American people expect."

Corwin's ability to self-fund a campaign and her private-sector background were appealing to Republicans, they said.

"She's at the top of every list," said Erie County Republican Chairman Nick Langworthy.

Corwin, a former Wall Street investment banker whose family sold the Talking Phone Book, said she and her husband, Philip, have agreed that they would put some of their own money into the race, though she didn't say how much.

"Right now, the district doesn't have a voice in Washington," she said. "There's 700,000 New Yorkers who are being left out of the table on important issues, particularly the fiscal issues."

Former Rep. Thomas Reynolds, who held the seat from 1999 to 2008, spoke highly of Corwin.

"She's my home assemblywoman," he said. "I know that she has all the skills and ability to do that job."

Maziarz, of Newfane, Niagara County, has high name recognition, a network of supporters and is a prolific fundraiser, though his departure from the Senate could create an issue for the GOP leadership, as Republicans have a two-member majority.

Maziarz said he was "very interested" and that a run for Congress was a "once in a lifetime" opportunity, but his position as the third highest-ranking senator will be a factor in his decision.

If Maziarz left the Senate, it would temporarily leave Senate Republicans without a partisan bloc of the 32 votes needed to pass legislation. And a vacancy could leave his district open to a Democratic challenge.

Majority Leader Dean Skelos said in New York City on Wednesday that he didn't think Maziarz would run.

Following Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks' announcement that she wasn't interested in running, County Republican Chairman Bill Reilich said he didn't have a front-runner, but a candidate's ability to raise resources is important.

"There's going to be a lot of money involved here," Reilich said.

Republican committee chairmen are expected to meet this weekend to talk about the process of selecting a candidate in a special election.

Each county receives a weighted vote based on the percentage of the vote Lee received in 2010, Langworthy said. Since Lee received the most votes in Erie County, that county has the largest weighted vote. Monroe County follows, then Niagara County.

The candidate who receives more than 50 percent of the weighted vote, as decided by the county chairmen, becomes the party's candidate.

Democrats have a similar procedure, which uses the gubernatorial vote, said Monroe County Democratic Chairman Joseph Morelle.

The Conservative and Independence parties make their decisions at the state level.

State Conservative Party Chairman Mike Long has had conversations with Maziarz and Corwin.

"Certainly there's a number of people who could be considered here," Long said. "It's really too early. ... I have to see who is going to get into the race."

On the Democratic side, former candidate Jon Powers, an Iraq War veteran who lost a primary for the seat in 2008, has been reaching out to party chairmen in the district, and Erie County officials Kathy Hochul, who is clerk, and Mark Poloncarz, who is comptroller, are also being mentioned as possible candidates.

"We intend on having a strong candidate, and we think we have a shot at winning," said Erie County Democratic Chairman Len Lenihan.

The political strength of the winner of a special election in the 26th would likely have an impact on how lines are drawn during the reapportionment process, which will occur before the 2012 elections. New York will lose two House districts, making the stakes for this election especially high.

The redistricting issue didn't seem to bother some potential candidates.

"You've got to end up in someone's district," said Maziarz.

The circumstances of the departure of one of the Republican Party's rising stars shocked constituents and political insiders.

"Everywhere I have gone it's been shock and disappointment," said Jodie Perry, CEO of the Greece Chamber of Commerce and a former member of Lee's small-business task force. "Hopefully we'll have the election quickly enough that we'll have representation in Congress again."

Gov. Andrew Cuomo's office received Lee's resignation early Thursday morning, but did not say when a special election would be called.

"The governor will take the appropriate steps to ensure New Yorkers in the 26th District are fairly represented in Congress," said spokesperson Josh Vlasto.

When Rep. Eric Massa resigned in March 2010, then-Gov. David Paterson did not call a special election until the day of the general election.

The Clerk of the House, a central office that manages a district's operations when a member can no longer serve, is now supervising Lee's staff members, who will continue to work on constituent cases.

District offices, including the office at 1577 West Ridge Road, Greece, will remain open.

While Assemblyman Dan Burling, R-Alexander, Genesee County, is pursuing support for a possible run, and Gates Supervisor Mark Assini said he might be interested, Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece, said he was concerned about how his departure from the Senate would affect the leadership there.

Brooks and Assemblyman Jim Hayes of Amherst, Erie County, said they weren't interested.

"I'm extremely disappointed, I think he betrayed the trust of his constituents," Brooks said, adding later, "Social media has put us on a stage 24/7, put us in a fish bowl 24/7."