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By John M. Foster
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The next state election is 16 months away, but one man is already planning his campaign to stop the re-election of Gov. Bill Richardson. Eli Chavez last ran as a Democrat in the 2004 primary for one of New Mexico's seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. But the Albuquerque resident was not allowed on the ballot in that race because he did not get enough votes at the state party convention, and because some signatures on later ballot petitions were thrown out by a judge.

The experience moved Chavez to plan a departure from the Democratic Party, and begin organizing a grass-roots effort to run as an independent in 2006 against Richardson.

"I call him 'Governor Greed,'" Chavez said. "He is a greedy bloodsucker. He's chewed up New Mexicans and spit them out and doesn't look back.

"Look at that airplane. All I can see is it flying to Iowa and New Hampshire," Chavez said, tying together the state's planned purchase of a new jet with Richardson's rumored presidential ambitions.

Richardson spokesman Billy Sparks did not immediately return two calls requesting the governor's comments.

At least one long-time politico said Chavez should not be discounted. Rio Arriba County Assessor and former state senator Arturo Rodarte said Chavez could tap into discontentment with Richardson that has slowly crept into Rio Arriba County.

Chavez was once a Republican, but switched to the Dems in 1981 after retiring from the federal Drug Enforcement Agency. Other than his failed run for Congress, he has run one other campaign, a race for sheriff of Bernalillo County.

His decision to leave the Democrats after more than 20 years had its roots in the state party's 2004 convention, when Richardson defied conventional practice and threw his support behind one candidate in the Congressional primary.

"I told everybody that the Governor had promised to stay out of the race," Chavez said.

Chavez said he had been assured by Richardson staffers that the governor would not be getting involved in the primary.

"It turned out to be a bunch of bullshit," Chavez said.

Chavez was later thrown off the ballot, and Richardson's favored candidate went on to lock up the nomination. That candidate, Richard Romero, was soundly trounced in the November election by incumbent Republican Heather Wilson.

A turning point in Chavez's decision to run for governor was Richardson's performance as chairman of the national Democratic Party's 2004 convention, where John Kerry was nominated to be the Party's presidential candidate. Chavez said he was disappointed that Democrats who were opposed to the war in Iraq did not get a chance to express their views at the main podium.

Chavez said most registered New Mexico voters, regardless of party affiliation, are tired of the way things are done in the Roundhouse and are ready for change. He believes he will be a moderate voice who can claim their votes and unseat the popular one-term governor.

The state's poor rankings in education, the high number of New Mexicans without health insurance and the state's elderly poor will be Chavez's main campaign themes, he said. He also plans to go hard after votes from organized labor, a group he said has been slighted by the Richardson administration. He pointed to the public employees union as an example of untapped discontent. He called the raises they have received under Richardson a "slap in the face," and said the governor's style of managing state employees is more befitting a governor in Mexico, not Nuevo Mexico.

"I don't think he trusts any of the state employees," Chavez said. "What really ticks me off is that this governor would rather go hire somebody at \$200,000 than listen to his own state employees and his cabinet."

Chavez also thinks he can win support in heroin-ravaged Rio Arriba County, a stronghold for Richardson back to his days as a U.S. Congressman representing the area.

"He thinks he has Northern New Mexico, but he has promised them everything for so many years," Chavez said. "Rio Arriba was the poorest county when he took over as congressman, it was the poorest county when he went to work for (President) Clinton, and it's among the poorest now."

Chavez, a Vietnam War veteran, said he has yet to change his party affiliation. And according to the Secretary of State's website, election dates and forms for 2006 will not be available until October. But Chavez's campaign planning has begun.

"We're looking for people, and we don't care if you're Republican or Democrat or Green Party," he said. "We have a small budget, but we're going to do it. Just like Jessie Ventura (another independent candidate who won a governor's race in Minnesota.)"