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## Senate Race That Might Have Been

Entry of State Senator Appears Too Late to Oust Sen. Bingaman

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By **Samson Habte**

Roll Call Staff

February 14, 2006

With a Valentine's Day filing deadline in New Mexico, five Republicans have announced their intention to run for the right to face Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) in November.

Three of the aspirants — state Sen. Joe Carraro, former state Sen. Tom Benavides and Santa Fe City Councilor David Pfeffer — took traditional political routes, earning their chits in state and local government.

Another candidate, Allen McCulloch, took what might be described as the Frist/Dean route — he's a doctor.

And then there's Steven Gavi, an assistant manager at a Roswell Wal-Mart running under the slogan, "An ordinary man for an extraordinary New Mexico."

But ordinary might not be good enough: Bingaman, who was first elected in 1982 and has won his four Senate elections by an average of 16 points, will be a heavy favorite against whichever candidate emerges from the crowded GOP primary.

"None of the [Republican] candidates is really well-known statewide," said Joe Monahan, an Albuquerque-based political consultant and commentator who has worked with candidates from both parties. "The Republicans don't have a very deep bench in New Mexico."

National Republicans have not targeted Bingaman's seat, choosing to steer resources to incumbent protection efforts and other states where a Democratic pick-off seems more likely.

But they once had high hopes for the seat. New Mexico is one of two states that flipped from the Democratic column in the 2000 presidential election to Republican in 2004 (though the results both times were extremely close). And Bingaman at the start of the cycle was sending out mixed signals about whether he'd run again.

Republican leaders in Washington, D.C., had hoped that Albuquerque Rep. Heather Wilson (R) would consider challenging Bingaman, but Wilson did not come forward and instead faces a tough re-election run in her swing House district.

"We know Sen. Bingaman's been there a long time and has a lot of money," conceded Brian Walton, a spokesman for the National Republican Senatorial Committee.

Still, the NRSC singled out McCulloch for praise, saying his ability to raise slightly more than \$140,000 was impressive given his status as a political novice with no established supporter or donor base.

Some overly optimistic New Mexico Republicans envision a scenario in which they are able to package McCulloch and J.R. Damron (R) — another physician who is challenging heavily favored Gov. Bill Richardson (D) — together as appealing political outsiders from the health care profession who can save New Mexico.

Walton said the NRSC would "take a closer look" at New Mexico if McCulloch or any of the other announced

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candidates is able to "maintain that kind of energy and support."

But while McCulloch's take might be impressive for a first-time challenger in a relatively poor state, it is dwarfed by Bingaman's war chest, which had ballooned to more than \$1.6 million at the end of 2005 and will not be depleted by a primary challenge.

McCulloch said in an interview that he would not need an exorbitant amount of money to beat Bingaman.

"It's not going to take the \$20 million that it would in New York," said McCulloch, who hopes to raise at least \$3.5 million if he wins the primary. "We have limited television markets and they're not as expensive as they are elsewhere."

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But McCulloch's fundraising edge in the GOP primary could soon dissipate. Carraro, whose legislative duties prevented him from active campaigning, has said he would begin fundraising in earnest at the conclusion of the state legislative session later this week.

Carraro could not be reached for comment, but the state Senator told the Albuquerque Tribune in January that he believed the national party will target New Mexico once he enters the race formally. He also said former Republican vice presidential candidate Jack Kemp has agreed to serve as his national finance chairman.

Carraro, a personable, voluble critic of Richardson's, is the type of straight-shooting, long-shot candidate who could have made strides — and provided a stark contrast to the reticent Bingaman — in the Senate race had he gotten a considerably earlier start. Instead, it is not even clear if he can win his party's nomination.

Bingaman has more than just big bucks, however. The Senator's seniority has allowed him to secure coveted committee assignments and enabled him to steer federal spending to projects in New Mexico, which is home to Los Alamos National Laboratory and a large and politically active federal workforce.

"We can safely assume that New Mexicans like seniority," Monahan said, noting that Bingaman and Republican New Mexico Sen. Pete Domenici are among the longest-serving duos in the Senate.

McCulloch conceded that it is "going to be a hurdle to overcome" the advantages Bingaman derives from his seniority and proven ability to steer federal spending to the state. But he insisted that Bingaman was vulnerable because his voting record was too liberal for New Mexico.

New Mexico narrowly supported President Bush over Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) in the 2004 presidential election, and Bingaman's opponents have attacked him for his opposition to the war in Iraq and the nomination of new Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito.

"Sen. Bingaman tells [New Mexico] voters what they want to hear while he's in the state, but then he gets to Washington and he's a Ted Kennedy Democrat," said McCulloch campaign manager Mario Sanchez.

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