

COMMENTARY

Friends say Sharp is weighing U.S. Senate run

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AUSTIN — Sometimes, the political itch just won't go away. Friends of former Comptroller John Sharp, who has lost two races for lieutenant governor and has long eyed the governor's office, say he now is focusing on a U.S. Senate seat.

That would be the seat that U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison is expected to leave sometime next year to prepare for a race for governor in 2010.

I say "expected" because Hutchison, despite repeated hints, hasn't publicly laid out her plans, and she backed out of an anticipated race for governor in 2006. This time, however, several Republican officeholders — about everyone but Gov. Rick Perry and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst — are eagerly anticipating her return to Texas and a possible opportunity to move up the political ladder.

Obviously, Perry, who says he wants another term, isn't thrilled. Neither is Dewhurst, who also wants to be governor but may have to settle for a shot at the U.S. Senate.

If Hutchison leaves the Senate early (some people expect her to step down shortly after the

legislative session adjourns next spring), Perry will appoint an interim successor and then schedule a special election, which (depending upon whom Perry appoints) could attract dozens of contenders.

State Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, already has formed an exploratory committee for a U.S. Senate race. Besides Dewhurst, other potential Republican successors include Texas Railroad Commissioners Michael Williams and Elizabeth Ames Jones, Attorney General Greg Abbott and former Secretary of State Roger Williams.

Sharp, a Democrat, has been mostly overlooked in the speculation, and he is shy about talking to reporters about his plans. But friends say he has been making the rounds, shoring up potential political and financial support, etc.

Some fellow Democrats believe Sharp's chance to win another statewide office has come and gone. And they believe he may have hurt himself within his party by helping Perry win passage of a new business tax two years ago, when the Legislature was facing a Texas Supreme Court deadline to make school finance changes.

But Sharp wouldn't be running in a Democratic primary. He would be running in a potentially wide-open special election.

Vying for job opportunities

The governor will be hobnobbing with his political base Tuesday and sharing the stage with supply-side-economics guru Arthur Laffer at an

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Austin meeting hosted by the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Laffer, a long-ago adviser to President Reagan, will present a report, commissioned by TPPF, comparing Texas and California on taxes, regulatory climates and other governmental policies affecting economic growth.

TPPF's teaser reads, "Staying Ahead of the Curve, Where Winner Takes All," a reference to the strong competition between Texas and California for new businesses and job growth.

California's state government is waist-deep in financial troubles now, while Texas' revenue outlook is rather rosy, but TPPF spokesman David Guenther wouldn't provide a preview of Laffer's report.

Laffer also was a strong proponent of Proposition 13, the property tax-cutting measure that Californians approved 30 years ago and is still being alternately praised and villified by various governmental experts today.

Last-minute filer

There is more than one reason that Stephanie Simmons, the last-minute filer for the special election for the District 17 state Senate seat, poses a potential threat to Democratic candidate Chris Bell.

Not only did the lawyer from Missouri City file as a Democrat, threatening to siphon some Democratic votes from Bell, she also is a black

woman, who will be running on the same day that a black man, Barack Obama, will be at the top of the Democratic ticket.

Bell's best chance of winning the Senate seat over four Republican candidates in the Republican-leaning district is to win outright without a runoff. And that prospect has been made more difficult by Simmons, an unknown candidate who won't return reporters' phone calls.

"I wouldn't characterize it (Simmons' race) as an extra concern," Bell spokesman Jason Stanford said. But 15 percent of the likely voters in District 17 are black, he said.

If Obama generates the kind of excitement he did in the March primary, the black turnout should be very high, potentially increasing votes for a black candidate, such as Simmons, and hurting Bell.

Bell contends Simmons' candidacy was orchestrated by Republicans.

A state district judge in Austin has scheduled a hearing today on Bell's suit to remove Simmons from the ballot. Bell contends she hasn't lived in the district, which includes parts of Harris and five other counties, long enough to run for the Senate.

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