

Sandoval looms over fight for Reid seat

By Michael R. Blood and Kimberly Pierceall, AP

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid's decision to retire next year leaves no clear successor in his home state of Nevada, where a popular Republican governor appears reluctant to change jobs and the pending loss of Reid's clout in Washington is causing anxiety over who might replace him.

As of Friday, the list of potential candidates came down to Gov. Brian Sandoval and everyone else. The political centrist who was easily re-elected last year is likely to face intense pressure from national Republicans and business interests to pick up where Reid leaves off on Capitol Hill.

Sandoval didn't deliver an unequivocal "no" Friday but he made clear the 2016 contest wasn't on his current agenda.

"My focus is in on Nevada, period. Politics can take care of itself, but right now I am absolutely laser-focused on getting my budget through and improving education in Nevada," he said.

Beyond the governor, the race would be wide open.

Reid, the longtime Senate Democratic leader, quickly blessed former Nevada Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto to run for his seat, while Rep. Dina Titus, another Democrat, said she would consider a bid. Among Republicans, other possibilities are Rep. Joe Heck, Nevada Attorney General Adam Laxalt and former Lt. Gov. Brian Krolicki.

"The major decision will be made by Brian Sandoval," said political scientist Eric Herzik, who teaches at the University of Nevada, Reno. "If he jumps in, this race tips overwhelmingly to the Republicans."

The Nevada campaign will inevitably figure in the fight for control of the Senate. In a video statement Friday, Reid said Democrats must retake the majority and "it is inappropriate for me to soak up all those resources" to defend his seat.

Awkward in public, clumsy with words, the 75-year-old Reid never was a beloved figure at home. He survived a brutal re-election campaign in 2010, when angry voters turned on him in the aftermath of the recession. He's been in the Senate since the Reagan era.

But he helped deliver victories for President Barack Obama, including on national health care reform, and his name is affiliated with a long string of wins in Nevada, from development on the Las Vegas Strip to Yucca Mountain, which he helped stop after it was approved by Congress as a nuclear dump in 2002.

Reid lost his role as Senate majority leader when last fall's elections swept Republicans into power. He suffered serious eye and facial injuries on New Year's Day while exercising at his Nevada home.

Las Vegas native Daniel Bastardo, smoking a cigarette during a break from his casino security job, said it was going to be hard to replace the man who proved Sin City was worthy of political respect.

"You gotta hang up your hat at some point," said the 28-year-old Democrat, understanding Reid's desire to retire. "I'm worried who's going to represent us now."

The sense of looming loss was felt around the state. With Reid's pending departure, Nevada will be without its most experienced hand on Capitol Hill. Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., has been in Washington for several years in a chamber where seniority equals influence, and the state's House members are relative newcomers in a body where members sometimes serve decades.

Sig Rogich, an influential Nevada Republican who helped Reid defend his seat in 2010, said "you don't lose him and not expect to feel the void." The Nevada Mining Association said the state would "miss having this native son in its corner."

The contest will play out in a state in which Democrats hold an edge in registration but voters have long displayed an independent streak. Obama was a two-time winner, but the state also helped send Republican George W. Bush to the White House twice.

Democrats are anchored in the Las Vegas region, while Republicans have an edge in rural parts of the state. A fast-growing Hispanic population is gradually reshaping the electorate, similar to other states in the West, including California.

A major factor in the coming election will be the casino industry, which has a long history ignoring party labels and picking winners in Nevada politics.

Jan Jones Blackhurst, an executive vice president at Caesars Entertainment, called Reid "irreplaceable." Reid won broad support from the industry in his 2010 victory over tea party favorite Sharron Angle, a Republican.

Finding the right successor, she said, is "a big issue and big concern."

With Reid's influence, "all of the sudden Nevada mattered," she added. With his exit, "that's going to be a challenge for the state."

The 2016 presidential race will also intertwine with the Senate contest, potentially driving up turnout among key voter groups, including Latinos. Part of Reid's victory in 2010 was credited to a Democratic political apparatus that ferreted out supporters, but it's unclear if another candidate can duplicate those efforts.

Betty Post, a Republican retiree in Las Vegas, said she was thrilled to see Reid stepping down. "We need new blood in there," she said, adding that she considered the long-serving senator a "bully."

To Las Vegas attorney Elizabeth Stephens, a Democrat, Reid's exit could be summed up succinctly. "It's scary," she said.