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**Republican gubernatorial race spurs speculation**

Things are a little messy right now as Republicans look for their candidate to take on Democratic Gov. Tony Evers.

State Rep. John Macco has suggested he’s working in coordination with Eric Hovde as they weigh bids only to have a source close to the Madison businessman dismiss that notion.

Rebecca Kleefisch suggested Republicans need to stoop to Democrats’ level and engage in ballot harvesting to win next fall only to have potential rival Kevin Nicholson call that idea dumb as a “bag of hammers.”

And Sean Duffy has been awfully quiet since Donald Trump threw a stink bomb into the field and suggested the former northern Wisconsin congressman get into the race.

Democrats are only too happy to grab the popcorn and enjoy the show. They also delight in any stories that complicate Kleefisch’s path to the nomination. The former lieutenant governor is still the most high-profile Republican in the race and is well ahead of any potential challengers in terms of building infrastructure and connecting with the grassroots. But whenever there’s a run of stories like these, insiders raise questions about how firm a hold she has on that frontrunner status and if she’ll face a bruising primary fight before getting a shot at Evers.

Macco continues to weigh a bid and continues to say he’s unfazed by Kleefisch’s head start. As the Green Bay-area Assemblyman moves toward a decision, he says he’s planning voter surveys that test a three-way primary race to include Kleefisch, Nicholson and possible additional candidates. He said his name will be included, but has not provided other names to WisPolitics.com. And he told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel he’s been working with Hovde. Further, he said Hovde is paying for the polling and has been in contact with various GOP figures such as lobbyist Bill McCoshen, who decided against a run, and former state and national GOP Chair Reince Priebus. None of those figures, though, are rushing to confirm Macco’s story, and a source close to Hovde calls the comments false.

Insiders scratch their heads at Macco’s tactics. Usually, when you’re weighing a bid for statewide office, you don’t want to get sideways with some party figures by talking out of turn.

Democrats have taken some digs at Kleefisch as a recording surfaced of her saying she’d “love” for school board members targeted for recall to face what she and Gov. Scott Walker went through during the recalls over Act 10 as they faced death threats. “Imagine if school board members felt something like that. Instead, all they feel is the pressure of their actual constituents asking them to do their job,” she says. A member of Kleefisch’s campaign team is one of the candidates seeking to oust an incumbent.

In another recording, Kleefisch said the GOP needs to “hire mercenaries” to win in 2022 and engage in ballot harvesting, a practice that she and other Republicans want to explicitly ban in state law. That prompted the comment from Nicholson about a bag of hammers, which grated some Republicans.

The GOP base is fired up about what they see as questionable tactics by Democrats and are looking to fight back. A comment like that, they say, suggests he doesn’t understand where the base is on the issue. Others see Kleefisch’s comment as inarticulate, but possibly an attempt to channel frustrations among some Republicans over the 2020 election to hype turnout in 2022. Still, it’s not lost on some that the same week Kleefisch’s comments about ballot harvesting come to light, the RNC points to the allegations against the Wisconsin Elections Commission raised by the Racine County sheriff as a reason why the national party is “fighting against ballot harvesting and other efforts to undermine election integrity at every turn.”

Meanwhile, Duffy has yet to say much since Trump encouraged him to run. To some, that silence is a sign of the reality of how much a challenge it would be. He just moved his family to New Jersey, bought an expensive house and enrolled his kids in school. Uprooting all that for a bid spurred by the whims of the former president seems like a longshot. Others, though, are actively kicking the tires on a run.

Thiensville Village President Van Mobley has told WisPolitics.com he’s thinking about a bid. The associate professor at Concordia University said he is busy with the semester now, but plans to make a decision in January. “Wisconsinites want a fresh face for the bright future and are tired of grim reminders of past mistakes,” Mobley says.

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