**Even with new maps, the number of legislators leaving falls short of past years**

By WisPolitics.com

The number of lawmakers retiring or running for other officers is poised to fall short of what it was two years ago, despite the uncertainty caused by the new maps.

As of May 3, 20 members of the Assembly were retiring or running for another office, while another three state senators had either resigned, retired or decided to run for another office. That’s behind the 30 departures in 2022, which was the third most since 1940, according to the Legislative Reference Bureau. The filing deadline is June 3.

Some of the late-breaking retirements, like Milwaukee Democrat Daniel Riemer, who first won his seat in 2012 at the age of 25, were a surprise. Others saw the writing on the wall with Rep. Terry Katsma, R-Oostburg. A member of the Joint Finance Committee, the former community banker has made tax cuts a pet cause, with him being a leading voice on that front over the past session in particular. But when you put all that work into tax cut plans only to see Gov. Tony Evers veto most of it — a dynamic unlikely to change next session — why stick around?

Democrats believed they’re set on retirements at this point, accounting for 13 of the 20 departures in the Assembly and with eight of those seeking another office. For all the worries from Republicans that the new maps from Gov. Tony Evers would cause chaos, the Assembly GOP was only looking at four retirements of members who were paired: James “Jimmy Boy” Edming, of Glen Flora; John Macco, of Ledgeview; Jon Plumer, of Lodi; and Nik Rettinger, of Mukwonago. Not only was Plumer paired with Rep. William Penterman, R-Columbus, the two were drawn into a heavily Democratic seat, prompting Penterman to hop over to a friendlier district on the numbers. Likewise, freshman Rep. Angie Sapik, R-Lake Nebagamon, opted against seeking reelection after her swing seat for the 2022 election turned into a deep blue district.

Insiders were watching to see if GOP Reps. Warren Petryk and Jessie Rodriguez make a similar calculation — or if they stay to see if they can fight against the blue tide of their new seats.

Petryk has been an aggressive fundraiser during his 14 years in the Assembly, even though his old seat morphed from a swingy district into one that wasn’t much of a challenge to hold. He raised $33,377 in 2023 —  not bad in an off year for a non-incumbent — and had $129,314 in the bank. But at 69 years old, insiders wondered whether he’ll take the plunge once again in what’s now a 56% Democratic seat. Petryk outperformed GOP gubernatorial candidate Tim Michels by 4 points in the district used in the 2022 election, and he’d likely have to run even further ahead of Donald Trump in the new seat just to have a shot at winning.

Rodriguez, meanwhile, did nearly 5 points better than Michels two years ago, and would likely need to match that again with Trump at the top of the ticket to win the reworked district. The first Hispanic immigrant elected to the Wisconsin Legislature and member of the Finance Committee, though, could likely use a little financial help, finishing 2023 with $12,935. To get her to run, insiders assumed Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, was promising Rodriguez and Petryk whatever help he can provide. Because those two, insiders say, are perhaps Republicans’ only shots to win those seats. And those seats could be key to a governable GOP majority in 2025.

It’s also why, sources say, Vos has been lobbying former state Rep. Dean Kaufert, R-Neenah, to come out of retirement and run for a Democratic-leaning seat in the Fox Valley. The new maps provide Democrats a path to the majority in the Assembly, but not a guarantee. To improve their chances, they’d likely need Joe Biden or Tammy Baldwin to win comfortably this fall and provide coattails that would help their candidates across the finish line. The polls have yet to show Biden in position to produce such a win. And while Baldwin is running ahead of the president, it’s no guarantee she’d produce a boost for down-ballot Democrats in the process if those numbers hold. So in a 50-50 race at the top of the ticket, Republicans would have the edge in holding the majority in the Assembly.

But they would likely need 54 or 55 seats to actually govern, insiders say. That’s because a handful of members in the caucus — like Reps. Scott Allen, of Waukesha, and Chuck Wichgers, of Muskego — have regularly been thorns in Vos’ side, and neither was looking at a GOP primary in their deep red seats.

A couple other Vos tormentors were looking at primaries, like Elijah Behnke, of Oconto, and Janel Brandtjen, of Menomonee Falls. But if they come back, the speaker might need 54 or 55 seats to actually run the place. That’s what would make Petryk, Rodriguez and Kaufert so important, some argue. Kaufert left the Assembly after winning the Neenah mayoral race in 2014 and served in that capacity for eight years before leaving in 2022. He’s still well known in the area, and the new Assembly seat puts Neenah and Menasha together with a 53% Democratic performance at the top of the ticket.

Kaufert is a throwback to a different time in Wisconsin politics, with what some would see as a moderate streak in today’s Capitol; he was among a handful of Republicans who voted against Act 10 in 2011. But that’s also the kind of candidate you’d need as a Republican to win the new district, some say. If Kaufert gets in, he’d face former Menasha Mayor Don Merkes, who spent eight years leading that city before opting against seeking reelection this spring.

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