

Ben Westlund Offers Third Option in Gubernatorial Race

by K_Guice

Independent candidate for governor, Ben Westlund is on a mission. The state senator has put tens of thousands of miles on his car traveling from town to town, making appearances, talking to the people of Oregon, speaking at news conferences and dinners all in the hopes of gathering the 18,364 signatures he needs by August 29. That is what it will take to officially get him into the governor's race and on November's ballot.

He says the path to becoming governor is a long journey, one that requires a total commitment and a road that was paved early on with hard decisions.

The former "recovering Republican" says it was not an easy choice leaving the Republican Party and becoming an independent but felt it's time for a change from the usual partisan politics. "It was very, very difficult. As I was coming up to this decision I was not sleeping. I was not eating well," he said. "It was a very uncomfortable time for me."

In the end, he said, "I felt the party left me, I didn't leave the party." Westlund added, "I still have many good friends and political allies in the Republican Party."

For Westlund, he felt it was time to move beyond Republican versus Democrat and focus purely on the people. "When I find a good idea that works for Oregon I don't care which side of the aisle it comes from," Westlund said. "Good ideas are good ideas and they are in short supply; so when you find one, you run with it."

Oregonians eager for change in state politics are getting behind his philosophy. Pushing nearly 6,000 votes at the time of this interview, he said it's those people that fuel his fire.

"The response is the thing that keeps us going," Westlund said. "People come up to me and say 'Ben, I don't agree with you on everything you are saying, but I'm supporting you because I appreciate the candor and courage with which you are conducting this campaign.'"

Westlund's outspoken nature and position on key campaign issues is garnering a lot of media attention.

"I have very strong opinions," he admits. "Some would call controversial opinions." Westlund

says the reason for being so openly opinionated is because he is concerned. "I see Oregon spiraling into mediocrity and below because extreme partisan politics, all too often, trumps good common sense and good public policy.

Rather than running his campaign or even the state as a whole on one party's agenda, Westlund chooses to look at things with an entrepreneur's eye.

"What I have always been my entire life is an entrepreneur," he said. "I've started all kinds of offbeat companies, found market niches, sought opportunity where others didn't, envisioned a solution and created the opportunity to fulfill the vision."

He states that is what he has done in the legislature for the past 10 years. "I consider myself a political entrepreneur identifying problems. In this case, the problems that fail Oregon, envisioning a solution and creating the opportunity to solve those problems is why I am running for governor," Westlund said.

Surprisingly, politics wasn't in his master plan. Westlund, who moved to Oregon as a teenager, graduated with a BA in education and history from Whitman College and continued his graduate studies at the University of Oregon.

In 1974, he moved to Central Oregon and founded an innovative company that made non-toxic, safe substances from the crushed fossils of marine life. After selling that successful business, Westlund went into cattle-breeding.

"When I was getting ready to retire at 44, 45, I was going to become a nurse," Westlund recalled. "I have always been very cognizant and very compassionate about other people's pain and ills." He said it was the responsibility to give back and be committed to his community and nursing was the same feeling that attracted him to politics.

"One of my buddies I knew from the cattle industry was in the legislature," he said. He insisted that Westlund would be great. Initially, Westlund said he brushed it off because he didn't have a background in politics and he had concerns that a troubled past would be a mark against him.

Instead of holding back, he decided to go for it. He went public with his story and ultimately was elected to the Oregon House of Representatives. "I loved it right away," Westlund said.

What he doesn't love about politics is at the core of what he says is destroying Oregon, the state's revenue structure. Fiscal reform is one of the three issues he is most passionate about.

"We currently we have the most volatile revenue structure in America," Westlund stated. "We have the highest dependency on a single tax that happens to be the most volatile tax."

Westlund claims the current structure stifles capital accumulation and crushes job creation. "There is one thing I can guarantee," he stated in a matter-of-fact manner, "if you brought in three wise men together and gave them three separate easels and said design a tax structure for Oregon they would not design anything close to our current structure."

Westlund believes the current structure has caused Oregon's revenues to fall further and faster than any state in the nation. "I do budgets," he said. "I'm the guy in charge of dealing with this and because of that I've cut more budgets deeper than any Oregonian in history."

The simple fact of the matter, according to Westlund, is that the tax structure hurts the economy and hurts the delivery of public service vital to all Oregonians. He says, "There is dumb, dumber, dumbest and then there is Oregon's tax structure."

One thing is for sure, Westlund's campaign will not be timidly or cautiously addressing the issues he feels Oregon is currently facing. "It's time someone stood up and said the emperor has no clothes," he said.

Other issues Westlund is standing up for include energy independence and universal health care.

"We have the most inefficient health care delivery system of any industrialized county in the world" he said. "Pain and suffering is bad enough, but unnecessary pain is immoral."

Westlund says the suffering of many could be avoided. "To do this, to achieve universal access is not some big government boondoggle," he said. "We have the money in the health care system right now."

However, Westlund does not see that change coming from Washington D.C. decision makers. Instead, he says it will come from innovative states backed not only by the people but by businesses as well.

“The reason it will succeed is because the health care crisis is not just an issue of the have-nots anymore. It’s an increasing issue of the haves,” Westlund said.

He says it is turning into a crisis of enormous ethical and economic proportion. “This isn’t just about providing health care for those who don’t have it.” He adds, “Just as important, it’s about lowering costs for those who already do.”

Westlund believes that the healthcare issues in the United States can have an impact on the nation’s competitive position in the world. However, he foresees that change is coming. “This will happen because the business community is coming on board and saying we can’t afford this anymore,” he said.

How about the people hearing Westlund’s message? In a Zogby Interactive poll conducted earlier this year, Westlund received 10.3 percent of the vote, while Gov. Kulongoski pulled in 32.5 percent and Saxton received 33.7 percent.

The poll could be an indication that Westlund could draw votes away from Kulongoski. That may be why both the governor and the Democratic Party campaigns accused Westlund of being the “other Republican” candidate.

Westlund has heard Democrats call him a Republican and Republicans call him Democrats, but he isn’t taking sides anymore.

“It is time to put ideas before ideology and it is time to put people before politics,” he said. “Those aren’t genius types of thoughts, it’s just the way I feel and it’s the right thing to do.”

So, what is he hoping people will keep in mind as they head into the voting booths? Westlund says it’s simple, “Vote your hope, not your fear.”