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The political pulse

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The election eye . . .

Whittom encouraged for Congress contest

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A Democratic move originating in Bonneville County and east Idaho is quietly underway seeking to persuade William F. Whittom, Rupert mayor and Idaho Farm Bureau state information director, to enter the 2nd District congressional contest against Republican U.S. Rep. George V. Hansen.

The leaders say they will urge Whittom to jump into the contest, pledging to help raise a war chest that can mount an effective campaign.

Whittom could not be reached on his reaction but in the past he has expressed interest in the position.

Whittom has received considerable publicity of late in south Idaho as an Idaho Farm Bureau spokesman outlining the sympathetic farmers' views in behalf of the controversial Mud Lake jack rabbit drives.

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Whittom, 40, is serving his second term as Rupert mayor, a part-time job, but he also holds a fulltime task with the Idaho Farm Bureau and is well acquainted in the broad-based agriculture circles.

The Democratic leaders behind the move who asked not to be identified at this time acknowledge it may take more than \$100,000 and possibly \$200,000 to finance a campaign against the well entrenched Hansen.

Whittom has had considerable political experience. He ran for the State Senate in 1972 but lost to then Republican Sen. John T. Peavey, but who last year was elected as a Democrat state senator.

Whittom has served on the Governor's Advisory Committee for Vocational Education and was chairman of the Association of Idaho Cities legislative committee in 1977-78 and is still active in municipal affairs.

He served as information director for the State Senate in 1973-74 and in 1965 was named information specialist for the USDA under Secretary Orvill Freeman. He has worked on many political campaigns on the national, state and local level.

Whittom is a native of McCall but grew up in New Plymouth and attended Idaho State University with a major in education and a minor in political science.

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Whittom expressed interest in the fall of 1979 of making the 1980 congressional race as a Democrat but later changed his mind. He acknowledged he had been contacted by a number of key Democrats urging his candidacy but did not make a commitment.

The key Democrats believe that Hansen is highly vulnerable and this may be the year he can be toppled.

They pointed out that against Democrat Diane Bilyeu, Pocatello, wife of State Sen. Chick Bilyeu, Hansen was able to get only 56 percent of the vote in the 1980 general election. This was despite a strong Reagan and Republican tide and the fact that Mrs. Bilyeu spent only \$25,000 in the campaign.

Two prospective Democratic candidates, Sen. Israel Merrill, Blackfoot, and Larry Echohawk, Fort Hall attorney, last month announced they would not seek the position after earlier professing interest.