

Mitchell eyes lieutenant governor's race

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State Sen. Mike P. Mitchell, D-Lewiston, known throughout the Idaho Legislature as the champion for the poor, elderly and disabled, is seriously considering seeking the lieutenant governor position in the 1982 elections.

At present, he is the only Democrat to indicate interest, as compared with at least two Republicans, C. L. "Butch" Otter, Boise, J.R. Simplot Co. executive and former legislator, and Attorney General David H. Leroy.

Mitchell said he likely will announce his intentions in September so as to give any other Democrat interested an opportunity to run, in case he decides to forego the race.

Mitchell, 54, with some justification, said he likely would have no trouble for re-election. He has been unopposed most of past elections and is considered one of the most popular legislators in the state. He is now serving his seventh term, or 14 years.

Mitchell said he plans to tour the state in early August to contact businessmen on how his candidacy will be received in the matter of finances and efforts.

"If I run, it will be to win and I want to know that I have an excellent chance," said Mitchell.

Mitchell said he believed he would have bright chances for victory against a Republican opponent, regardless of whether it is Otter, Leroy or any other.

He said Democrat Gov. John V. Evans appears

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strong throughout the state. He thus banks on this as a key factor in a victorious campaign.

With Evans shoring up his strength, Mitchell said he found that in the state, the incumbent governor appears a solid favorite against a Republican candidate, whether it be against Lt. Gov. Philip E. Batt, who has announced; House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, Twin Falls, who is expected to jump in the fray in the fall, or any other.

Mitchell, who was in Idaho Falls this week to participate in an export seminar as an Idaho representative to the International Trade and Investment Forum at Taiwan May 10-16, took the opportunity to discuss his political chances with some Idaho Falls leaders.

Mitchell said his candidacy will be based on five factors:

- Responses to letters he has written on how they feel about Evans, and what are the issues and problems.
- What are the prospects for financial support for a Democratic lieutenant governor candidate.
- If he is to serve as lieutenant governor, he wants to make certain that it will be in a meaningful role to complement the governor's duties, rather than relegated to continuing a program of little input in state government.
- What are the chances of Democrats being elected statewide in general, and those of a lieutenant governor in particular.
- A family decision hinging on his absences from his family.

Mitchell is one of the strongest members of the all powerful Joint Finance Appropriation Committee and is generally considered the leader of the faction that seeks funding for human service programs, such as in the health field, and a battler for adequate public education and higher education funding.

As such he was in constant fight with the conservative bloc led by Sen. Dean Van Engelen, R-Burley, and generally on the losing side for seeking to get more funding for what he considered essential programs.

Mitchell said, however, that with a \$16 million surplus fund assured for the end of the fiscal year and with some \$28 million more probable for the next fiscal year as recommended by the governor, the Democrats have a key issue for attacking the Republicans for unnecessarily seeking to dismantle state government.

He said the governor had rightfully maintained there was enough money to fund a \$440 million budget for fiscal 1982, rather than the Republican controlled legislative budget of \$422 million.

Mitchell, now a business consultant, said he thus views as a winning combination his entry in the race with Evans.

"I believe we could do well as economic conditions improve," said Mitchell.

Mitchell said after his statewide visits in August and studying political conditions he will reach a decision by no later than the end of September.

"Right now, Democratic political chances look good," he said.