

Emails uncover acrimony in GOP



Senate President Jeff Essmann, R-Billings, left, and Senate Majority Leader Art Wittich, R-Bozeman, answer questions about an email exchange prior to the November election in the Senate president office Tuesday afternoon in Helena. TRIBUNE
PHOTO/LARRY BECKNER

Senate leaders outline 'long game' vision for a conservative Montana

By John S. Adams
Tribune Capitol Bureau

HELENA — On the surface, lawmakers in the 63rd Montana Legislature appear to be working to get along and to advance bills both parties can live with.

But below the surface, a simmering ideological battle is threatening to boil over onto the Senate floor.

The turmoil isn't between Republicans, who control both houses of the Legislature, and their Democratic counterparts. The most heated political power struggle under way at the Capitol right now is between the conservative and moderate factions within the GOP caucus.

It's a power struggle that has played out in local legislative primary races. It is often bantered about in the halls of the Capitol and in the watering holes around Helena.

Emails recently obtained by the Tribune pull back the curtain and give the public a glimpse of the seething intra-party acrimony that has infected the Legislature's most powerful body.

The documents show key members of the Senate Republican cau-

ONLINE EXTRA

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cus, including members of the current leadership team, began plotting their power play as early as September of last year.

According to one former state senator who was defeated in a three-way Republican primary last June, conservative members of the Senate caucus began identifying allies and enemies and painting political targets as early as July 2011, just a few months after the session adjourned.

The emails and documents — which feature a lengthy discussion between Senate President Jeff Essmann of Billings, Senate Majority Leader Art Wittich of Bozeman, Sen. Jason Priest of Red Lodge, Majority Whip Frederick "Eric" Moore of Miles City, Sen. Ed Walker of Billings and Sen. Dave Lewis of Helena — outline the strategy the conservative Republicans in the Senate caucus used to seize power from the 2011 leadership team in order to advance their policies in 2013.

Changing of the guard

During the party leadership elections in November, Essmann, the 2011 majority leader, defeated former Sen. President Jim Peterson of Buffalo for control of the Senate's top leadership post.

That same election saw Wittich defeat former Sen. Pro Tempore Bruce Tutvedt of Kalispell for the No. 2 position of majority leader. Many political observers were taken aback by the results. Peterson and his supporters were shocked, having believed going into the leadership election that they had enough support to win.

At the time, neither the new leadership team nor the old leadership team commented on the upheaval, what lead up to it or why Senate Republicans decided to oust last sessions' leaders.

Lewis, in nominating Essmann, offered the only clues at the time:

"My feeling is that we need to be much more clear about what we stand for as Republicans, how in fact we differ from the Democrats in our

GOP emails

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beliefs."

The goal of the new conservative leadership team, as Essmann detailed in one email last September, was to advance a "long game strategy" that "involves changing the face of the Montana Supreme Court" so the high court "does not find a constitutional block to every conservative policy initiative and will give (Republicans) a better shot at redistricting in 10 years."

(Republican Redistricting Commissioner) Jon Bennion was able to draw a map with 63 safe Republican seats," Essmann wrote on Sept. 13 in an email with the subject line "Agenda control."

"If we can implement the long term strategy we will be in a position to actually elect a majority of conservatives in both bodies, adopt conservative legislation and have a court that will uphold it," Essmann wrote.

There is also evidence that Essmann, Wittich and Priest worked to "purge" the Republican caucus of members they deemed too moderate, a charge they did not deny in an interview Tuesday.

"We must help the purge along," Majority Leader Art Wittich wrote in a Sept. 13 email. "Hopefully, a new phoenix will rise from the ashes."

'Agenda control'

According to Essmann, Wittich, Priest and Moore, who discussed the email exchange in interviews with the Tribune Capital Bureau on Tuesday, the email chain shows nothing more than the fact that there's a philosophical tug-of-war going on within the Republican party.

Essmann said the strident language contained in the digital dialogue obtained by the Tribune is reflective of the season in which the conversation occurred.

"As you know, in September when a lot of these emails were flying around, we were in the middle of a hot general election season," Essmann said. "Both parties, in the middle of election seasons, ramp up the rhetoric. Republicans do it. Democrats do it.

Everybody does it. It's part of the process."

None of the five men included in the email was up for election in 2012.

The emails exchanges took place from Sept. 7-27, 2012. The 2012 general election was fewer than two months away, and Republican lawmakers were looking to easily win majorities in both legislative houses, a situation they also enjoyed in the 2011 session.

Which party would control of the governor's office was less certain.

"The discussion will be somewhat academic if (Democrat) Steve Bullock is elected Governor, as we will be left to our strategy of putting another 4 or 5 referendums on the 2014 ballot," Essmann wrote.

In a Sept. 13 email with the subject "Agenda Control," Essmann lamented the "conundrum" facing the conservative faction of the party:

"The moderates are in a position to block the advancement of our policies if they align with the Ds on either the votes on the bills themselves or the votes on the leadership, which can operate the levers of power to block the advancement of bills," Essmann wrote.

Essmann went on in his email to question: "Is it better to force the moderates to be transparent in their cooperation with the Dems to block our objectives, so that we can use that to raise money and win primaries, or is it better to negotiate a deal — subject to be broken — to advance conservative policies? Which approach will maintain the support of our backers."

In his Sept. 13 response, Wittich said he did not trust the moderate members of the party.

Referring to former Senate President Jim Peterson as "BJ," Wittich wrote:

"BJ, Llew (Sen. Llew Jones, R-Conrad) and Assoc. have everything to lose. We are in a great position when the fists start flying."

Wittich went on to say: "We want the people watching to know there is a legitimate battle of ideas in this country and state, and at least some of us 'get it.' That will help with logistics, and frankly recruiting reinforcements."

Wittich, in the email, dismissed the notion of making



Wittich



Moore



Priest



Essmann

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MAJORITY LEADER ART WITTICH, in a Sept. 13 email

any kind of political or power sharing deals with the moderate faction of the caucus.

"I do deals for a living," Wittich wrote. "The other side's ability to fight (or refuse a deal) always dictates the outcome. If BJ and crew can't see this, they are bigger chumps than I thought."

Sen. Jason Priest indicated that he was willing to enter into negotiations with the moderate faction of the party, but he didn't put stock in the likelihood of anything positive coming from the negotiations.

"I am baffled by the idea that we can trust him," Priest wrote.

Priest, who founded and served as treasurer of a political action committee called Montana Growth Network, wondered: "When it goes wrong, who will answer to the base and advocates?"

"How will we explain we negotiated away our power for nothing?" Priest wrote. "Why should they be there for us in the future? Why did I raise \$200k for legislative races to piss it away?"

In his response, Moore took the "contrary point of view."

"I have seen firsthand how civil war leads to defeat," Moore wrote, adding later, "I'm certainly not suggesting that we give away the presidency without getting handsomely paid for it (with) policy."

On Sept. 15, Essmann indicated that the moderate members of the caucus, including Tutvedt, were threatening to "pull the nuclear trigger" and side with Democrats to vote for Peterson on the Senate floor.

In the Senate, both parties vote on the Senate president, but only the majority party votes for the majority leaders. There were rumors last fall that the moderate members of the GOP caucus were threatening to side with Senate Democrats in order to elect Peterson, instead of Essmann as president.

Republicans in the House pulled a similar move in 2004 when they backed Miles City Democrat Gary Matthews over Minority Leader Dave Wanzel, who was in line to be the House speaker.

Apparently concerned that members of their caucus were plotting a similar stunt in the Senate, Essmann proposed a possible power-sharing agreement between the conservative and moderate factions of the caucus.

"Even if we have the protection provided by this power sharing arrangement they will be able to move their stuff with sufficient Dem support, which is what they are threatening us with," Essmann wrote. "If they are not willing to work with us now to establish this power sharing arrangement, then you could reasonably conclude they will not work with us in the session."

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Carmine Mowbray of Polson, who took office in 2011 after Republican Sen. John Brueggeman abruptly resigned his seat at the start of the 2011 session, said she was the victim of spending by outside third-party "dark money" groups during her 2012 primary campaign.

Mowbray said she believes she was targeted because she told Wittich in July 2011 that she would support the former leadership regime if she was re-elected in November 2012.

"It was at the Governor's Cup golf tournament in Whitefish," Mowbray recalled in telephone interviews this week. "Art Wittich approached me and asked me if I would support Sen. Peterson and Sen. Tutvedt or if I'd support him and Sen. Essmann."

Mowbray, who came into the 2011 session on the 17th legislative day, said she felt loyal to Peterson and Tutvedt, who she said took her under their wings and helped her along in her first session.

Mowbray said she told Wittich so.

"I was so naive," Mowbray said. "It didn't occur to me until much later what he was asking me."

Mowbray said when she found herself the victim of vicious last-minute attacks a year later, it became clear to her what had happened.

"It's dark money that they were throwing around," Mowbray said, adding that she was caught completely off guard by the attacks. "I played by the rules. I disclosed everything. My campaign was totally on my abil-

ities, my qualifications, and my experience."

Mowbray filed a complaint last month against Republican Sen. Janna Taylor, who won Mowbray's seat, Taxpayers for Liberty, American Tradition Partnership, Montana Family Foundation, the National Pro-Life Alliance and the National Association for Gun Rights, alleging violations of campaign finance and practices laws.

Wittich, Priest, Essmann and Moore denied coordinating with any of the third-party groups that spent money in the Senate District 6 Republican primary.

While they deny actively coordinating with individual Republican candidates during the 2012 primary election, the men make no bones about the fact that they want more conservative members in the Senate Republican caucus.

"In the House, they've been having competitive (primary) elections since 2005, maybe even before," Priest said. "I don't think a competition of ideas within parties is a bad thing."

Priest said the emails revealed this week are a "call to action."

"Are you for more government or less?" Priest said. "It's as simple as that."

Wittich said discussions like those that took place in emails last fall demonstrate the diversity of the Republican party.

"I think that diversity strengthens us," Wittich said. "Just like we have diverse debates here at the Capitol between Democrats and Republicans, having that discussion strengthens us. This is a marketplace of ideas."

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