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 caucus, 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 led up to it or why Senate Republicans decided to oust last session’s 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

See GOP EMAILS, SA
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 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 referendum questions on the 2014 ballot," Essmann wrote.

In a Sept. 13 email with the subject line "Agenda control," Essmann lamented the "cosnundrum" facing the conservative faction of the party. "I'm not going 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 moderates they deemed too moderate, a charge they did not deny in an interview Tuesday.

"We must help the purge along," Majority Leader Art Wittich, in a Sept. 13 email.

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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 voted on the Senate president, but only the majority party votes for the majority leader. 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 Majority Leader Dave Wanzenreid, who was in line to be the House speaker.

As this went to press, moderates 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.

And that's what he wrote.

Margaret Mowbray, who took office in 2011 after Republican Sen. John Bruegeman 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 was selected 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 attack ads 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 abilities, my qualifications, and my experience.

Mowbray filed a complaint last month against Republican Sen. Janna Taylor, who won Mowbray's seat, Taxpayers for Liberty, America 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 individuals Republicans candidates during the 2012 primary campaign, 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 it's 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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