

GAY MARRIAGE FOE EYES RUN FOR HOUSE: [THIRD EDITION]

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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[Thomas D. DeVisscher], also an opponent of gay marriage, was upbeat about the prospect of facing a well-known Republican in the primary, although he had never heard of Crews before a reporter called yesterday. Told that Crews was running, the North Attleborough resident said, "Cool beans." He added that his goal is to "improve the seat."

Philip Johnston, chairman of the state Democratic Party, said McGovern would be wise to take a Crews candidacy seriously, but Johnston said McGovern could count on generous support from the state and national parties if Crews were to win the Republican nomination.

FULL TEXT

Ronald A. Crews, the former Georgia state lawmaker who has spearheaded the push to ban gay marriage in Massachusetts, has taken initial steps to run as a Republican for the congressional seat now held by US Representative James P. McGovern, a four-term Democrat, state officials said yesterday.

On Thursday, Crews, who moved to Ashland roughly three years ago to head the Massachusetts Family Institute, pulled paper work to gather signatures required to seek the GOP nomination, said a spokesman for Secretary of State William F. Galvin.

Ray McNulty, who works with Crews at the Coalition for Marriage, a group that opposes gay marriage, said Crews was on vacation with his wife, Jonda, and could not be reached for comment.

State GOP leaders, who expressed surprise at Crews's interest in running for Congress, said they were not yet prepared to endorse his candidacy. They said they had no inkling that Crews was interested in taking on McGovern, a native of his district in Central and Southeastern Massachusetts.

"We would certainly want to talk to him," said state GOP executive director Dominick Ianno, pointing out that, as far as he knew, Crews had not spoken to Governor Mitt Romney about his plans. "We will be out there supporting candidates who have a chance of being elected, and that remains to be seen for any candidate. It's too early to tell."

Still, other Republican heavyweights see potential in the former US Army chaplain, mostly because a Republican

who opposes gay marriage won the recent special election to replace state Senator Cheryl A. Jacques, even though the vote occurred on the day Democrats were choosing a presidential nominee.

Because of Crews's national ties, Republican National Committeeman and former White House political director Ron Kaufman said, Crews could pose a formidable challenge to McGovern, who was first elected in 1996.

"Every candidate for Congress brings with him or her some advantages," said Kaufman, who served under President George H.W. Bush. "Sometimes it's money. Sometimes it's name ID. Sometimes it's relationships. Crews, he sure has a big Rolodex."

A ubiquitous presence in the State House over the past several months, Crews forged close ties with several local and national conservative organizations, such as Concerned Women for America and the Family Research Council, who joined to oppose gay marriage after the Nov. 18 Supreme Judicial Court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage.

McGovern, by contrast, signed a letter with the rest of the state's congressional delegation earlier this year opposing any constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage.

He has plenty of support inside and outside the Third Congressional District, and already has close to \$400,000 in his campaign war chest, federal records show.

Michael Mershon, a spokesman for McGovern, said he was confident that the incumbent Democrat would prevail Election Day.

"The people of Massachusetts care about jobs, health care, education, and the environment," said a statement Mershon released. "Jim McGovern is proud of his record on these issues, and he's delivered for his district. He has spent his time in Congress fighting for families and trying to bring people together. As for the campaign, we'll be ready. Congressman McGovern has collected over 4,000 signatures, he has an aggressive fund-raising schedule, and he'll be fully prepared."

In order to become the Republican nominee, Crews must first gather at least 2,000 signatures and then beat other Republican challengers in the subsequent primary. In February, tractor-trailer driver Thomas D. DeVisscher pulled his own papers to run on the Republican ticket and said he has already gathered 970 signatures.

DeVisscher, also an opponent of gay marriage, was upbeat about the prospect of facing a well-known Republican in the primary, although he had never heard of Crews before a reporter called yesterday. Told that Crews was running, the North Attleborough resident said, "Cool beans." He added that his goal is to "improve the seat."

"We're all brothers and sisters," DeVisscher said. "I don't believe in gay marriage, but I don't think it's the end of the world."

Crews will also face opposition from the Log Cabin Republicans, a national gay GOP group headed by former Massachusetts lawmaker Patrick Guerriero. "The last thing the US Congress needs is a new voice of intolerance," said Guerriero, who is fighting a proposal, backed by President Bush, to pass a federal constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

Last month, after months of intense lobbying led by Crews, state lawmakers took the first step toward passage of a

state constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage but establish civil unions. Crews worked with conservative Democrats and Republicans to push measures that would have banned same-sex nuptials but would not have established civil unions. Those measures failed.

Crews said he was disappointed with the measure that was eventually approved, which must be passed again in the next legislative session in order to appear on the ballot in November 2006. In the meantime, Crews has applauded efforts by the governor to block the SJC's ruling before same-sex marriages take place on May 17, when the court's ruling is set to go into effect.

Philip Johnston, chairman of the state Democratic Party, said McGovern would be wise to take a Crews candidacy seriously, but Johnston said McGovern could count on generous support from the state and national parties if Crews were to win the Republican nomination.

"Jim McGovern is wildly popular in his district for good reason, and I can't imagine that he [Crews] would represent any serious opposition," Johnston said.

In the 2002 election, McGovern ran unopposed, attracting 155,697 of 212,304 total votes cast in the district.

Crews, an ordained minister who speaks with a gentle Southern accent, held a seat in the Georgia Legislature from 1992 to 1998. Crews told the Globe last year that his loss in the 1998 election was largely attributable to two factors: his support for removing the Confederate battle emblem from the Georgia state flag and "the homosexual activists who moved into my district just to be able to vote against me."

SIDEBAR: THIRD DISTRICT Population: 634,585 Median Income: \$50,223 Residents in poverty: 9% PLEASE REFER TO MICROFILM FOR CHART DATA

DETAILS

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