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NEWS

Ben Stuckart won't be running for Congress against McMorris Rodgers; cites family health issues

With his mom and brother facing serious difficulties, he withdraws from the race

Posted By Daniel Walters on Tue, Jun 6, 2017 at 4:00 PM



Daniel Walters photo

Ben Stuckart gets choked up as he discusses immigration – one of the issues he's most passionate about – at the #RallyWithRefugees earlier this year.

City Council President Ben Stuckart was supposed to be the best chance Democrats had in years to topple Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers.

At least, that was the idea behind the *Stranger* profile "Meet the Man Who Could Turn Eastern Washington Blue," that Stuckart still has pinned at the top of his campaign page.

But just below that is the lengthy statement that Stuckart posted to Facebook announcing his withdrawal.

"Today I am announcing the end of my Congressional campaign in order to focus on family

health issues that have arisen over the last few weeks," Stuckart wrote. "In my heart, I believed that I could represent the citizens of Spokane as Council President, run a people-first campaign against a member of Congressional leadership, and meet my obligations to my extended family. I now know that I simply cannot adequately fulfill my duties to each without a detriment to the whole."

Stuckart doesn't want to go into details on the record in order to protect their privacy, but in an interview with the *Inlander*, he describes dealing with serious family health issues, first with his mother and then — just recently — with his brother.

He says he got a call from his brother Thursday, detailing a serious setback. But as of Friday, Stuckart's heart still seemed in the race, at least publicly.

"Ever heard of America Rising?" Stuckart tweeted on Friday. "They're a GOP PAC to research and attack Dems. They've started filing public records requests on me. Bring it on."

But he says he and his wife had a long conversation about the future of his campaign at their property in North Idaho on Sunday. He says he blurted out to his wife that he thought he should withdraw from the race.

"The campaign was only going to get busier," Stuckart says. "The health issues in my families are only going to get more intense. I'm not able to fully focus right now. That's only going to get worse."

And family, ultimately, came first.

"I hope what I'm able to do with my mental focus is just focus on the family and the city for the next 12 months and not let any other thing take precedence," Stuckart says. "Presently, I'm running for 'good brother' and 'good son'."

He realizes that other politicians may be able to just adapt to family crises and continue to run, but he says his situation is different.

"I come from such a small family," Stuckart says. "I may think of things differently because I don't have eight siblings. It's literally my brother, my mom and me."

In a way, it mirrors Stuckart's decision not to run for mayor back in early 2015. Back then, Stuckart was widely seen as the leading contender to challenge Mayor David Condon. But the illness and death of his father left him reeling and, despite his father's encouragement to run for mayor, Stuckart stuck with his city council position instead.

"I have a lot of issues with my family that definitely ran into my ability to multitask," Stuckart says.

This is the second time Stuckart's career trajectory has taken a sharp turn in less than a year. Through much of 2016, Stuckart was planning to run for mayor in 2019. ("It's a sure thing as you can get," Stuckart said a year ago.) But then he suddenly shifted, announcing in December that he considered himself more of a legislator than an executive and would be running for Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers' seat.

In a strongly Republican district, Stuckart's campaign was always a long shot — particularly because Stuckart didn't downplay his liberal views — but he had been attempting to show that he had a stronger chance of competing than most recent Democratic nominees. Just last week, he gave the results of an internal poll to the *Spokesman-Review's* Shawn Vestal, suggesting he was only trailing McMorris Rodgers by 7 points.

"My entire life I've been told things are impossible, whether it was running a nonprofit or running for council president," Stuckart told the *Inlander* last year.

Stuckart, a former college debater, takes glee in the rough and tumble of debate. In nearly every way, he's the opposite of McMorris Rodgers, who is cautious, rarely straying from mainstream Republican party positions or stock phrases. Stuckart is far more eager to jump into the fray, speaking his mind even when he later regrets doing so.

For example, when local Republicans rallied their troops to ask Stuckart a set of challenging questions at a Town Hall meeting, Stuckart went a step further, volunteering to answer each question individually, one by one, at his town hall.

By contrast, McMorris Rodgers (and Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell) have not held any in-person town halls since after Donald Trump's election.

"Ben has a really populist, plainspoken way of speaking for regular folks," says Andrew Biviano, chair of the Spokane County Democrats. "Seeing issues that a lot of people miss. He sees citizens concerns at the ground level, not the 5,000-foot view. He could articulate that in a way not a lot of people could."

Biviano says Stuckart dropping out of the race is a setback.

"Because there's not other Bens that are sitting around," Biviano says. "I was really saddened by it. I know he was working really hard at this. He started two years before the election because he really wanted it. It wasn't a decision that he came to easily."

Stuckart says he's not going to use his campaign donations to start a PAC, or anything like that.

"Most of this morning was spent calling some of my larger donors. I'm offering to refund them," Stuckart says.

Matthew Sutherland, a WSU student, is currently the only Democrat officially in the race, though former Washington state Sen. Majority Leader Lisa Brown has been expected to join the fray. In a brief in-person conversation on the Centennial Trail yesterday, Brown declined to say if she would be joining the race.

"I'm not out there talking to somebody else about running to take my place," Stuckart says.

Biviano says the party is not planning to recruit a candidate, believing it's better for people to decide to run on their own initiative.

For Stuckart, meanwhile, the focus is on his loved ones:

"Tomorrow or the next day, I can jump on a plane and just be with my brother and not worry about anything but just being with him," Stuckart says. "And that means I can actively hang out with my mom more than once a week."

Here's Stuckart's full statement.

Today I am announcing the end of my Congressional campaign in order to focus on family health issues that have arisen over the last few weeks. In my heart, I believed that I could represent the citizens of Spokane as Council President, run a people-first campaign against a member of Congressional leadership, and meet my obligations to my extended family. I now know that I simply cannot adequately fulfill my duties to each without a detriment to the whole. My family deserves my focus on their health right now. The citizens of Spokane reelected me to lead an agenda that addresses the cyclical poverty that affects our city, focuses on economic development and job growth, and pursues environmental sustainability in all City operations. Those issues deserve my focus and attention right now.

Although it won't be me carrying the message, I am heartened by recent poll numbers that show a strong number of Eastern Washingtonians ready to make a change in Congress. I am strengthened by numbers that show the people of Washington's 5th Congressional district believe that getting care when you are sick is a basic human right. I am humbled by the care and concern people have shown for each other in response to the recent wave of hate crimes across our region and country. And I am amused that the people of Eastern Washington completely get the irony when their six-term congresswoman talks about "draining the swamp". I share their disgust when we see another disparaging tweet from our President on the national news. I feel their fear every morning when I glance at the newspaper headlines. And I commit to always joining them in demanding equality, truthfulness, and responsiveness from our Federal government. I want to thank the countless volunteers and people I have met over the last six months.

Thank you for sharing your desires for a better Eastern Washington. Thank you for adding to our vision. I want to thank my campaign manager Alexander Scott and my entire campaign team, my Council colleagues for stepping up in my absence, and my family for their incredible support and patience.

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