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No low profile for indicted Sizemore -- he runs for governor

By Brent Walth, The Oregonian

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Bill Sizemore says he's running for governor again because he's the only true conservative in the Republican primary. Nevertheless, party leaders are uncomfortable with the candidacy of Sizemore, whose political career includes several unsuccessful attempts at elective office, numerous ballot initiatives and bitter fights against public employee unions.

So here's a scenario that would give most politicians pause:

A jury says you ran a racketeering scheme with campaign money. Your political committees owe millions in judgments, and you face felony charges for evading state taxes. Plus, you're unemployed and can't afford a lawyer to keep you out of prison.

On top of that, you can't get invited to the state's major Republican event, and party leaders squirm at the mention of your name.

Most politicians might quit -- or at least duck their heads and simply hope to survive.

Not Bill Sizemore. He runs for governor.

Sizemore, 58, once dominated Oregon politics by pushing ballot measures on a range of conservative causes. He says he's running now, for a second time, because he's the only true conservative in the GOP primary.

He opposes abortion, higher taxes, bigger government, statewide land-use planning, gun control and, most important, the expanded power of what he says are his biggest enemies: public employee unions.

"Republican primary voters should have an opportunity for a viable conservative choice," he says. "And you can tell everyone that I'm campaigning with my head

Bill Sizemore on the ballot

In 1980, won the Republican primary for an Oregon Senate seat unopposed as a write-in, then lost to incumbent Democrat Jim Gardner

held high."

Sizemore first ran for office in the 1980s in unsuccessful bids for the state Senate and Portland City Council. He ran a carpet business and later launched a toy company. He won the GOP nomination for governor in 1998, but the incumbent, Gov. John Kitzhaber, trounced him. During that campaign, The Oregonian reported Sizemore left a trail of scorned creditors and \$795,000 in unpaid business debts.

The teachers unions sued him in 2002, alleging Sizemore's initiative-petition operations amounted to racketeering. The unions won, with Sizemore found in contempt of court twice in the process.

Many of Sizemore's troubles have spun out of those racketeering cases.

In a 2008 follow-up hearing, court records showed that he spent hundreds of thousands of dollars from a nonprofit under his control for his personal use.

In that same hearing, Sizemore admitted under oath that he hadn't filed state tax returns in the past two years. Based largely on his testimony, the Oregon Department of Justice last fall indicted him and his wife, Cindy, on three felony counts each of tax evasion.

The indictments came one week after Sizemore announced his candidacy for governor.

Sizemore sees the indictments as frivolous and one more way to silence him, part of a vendetta led by Attorney General John Kroger, a Democrat whose 2008 campaign was financed largely by public employee unions.

He predicts with cheery optimism that he will win the GOP nomination May 18, and then triumph at trial, which won't happen before the primary.

"I have every confidence the charges will fall apart," he says, "and I will be acquitted."

Later in the 1980s, lost two campaigns for the Portland City Council

In 1998, won the Republican nomination for governor, then lost to incumbent Democrat John Kitzhaber, 64 percent to 30 percent

Beginning in 1994, Sizemore and his allies have sponsored 17 ballot measures, mostly to reduce taxes or curtail public employee unions. Voters have rejected 14 and the courts have overturned two that voters approved.

In 1996, left a lasting impact on Oregon with the passage of Measure 47, which reduced property taxes and limited annual tax increases. Lawmakers said it was riddled with loopholes and, with Sizemore's cooperation, rewrote it into Measure 50, which voters approved in 1998.



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The Oregonian/1998

Bill Sizemore celebrates with his family on primary election night in May 1998 after he won the Republican nomination for governor. Democrat John Kitzhaber, the incumbent, beat Sizemore by more than 2-to-1 in the November general election.

Sizemore's bid for governor allows him to go after the unions he says have tied his life in knots. Oregon, he says, is

"engaged in a civil war with an aggressive socialist left" and he's the only candidate who will stand up to the unions.

That fight and his own bleed together.

"The battle lines have become clear between my enemies and myself," Sizemore told the Portland City Club last week. "There's some temptation to find the middle ground and try to all get along. I think we're past that in dealing with the public employee unions. I think they own the state from the top to the bottom, literally."

Party officials cringe

While Sizemore delivers a message that should appeal to the party's base, Oregon Republican officials cringe at the sight of a candidate under criminal indictment for tax evasion seeking the party's nomination.

"Yeesh," says Oregon GOP Chairman Bob Tiernan when asked to discuss Sizemore's candidacy. "He's not a subject I enjoy talking about."

Tiernan says he feels sympathy for Sizemore but wishes he had put his legal troubles behind him before running.

"He's been picked on to death for his views, and the unions have villainized him," Tiernan says. "But he's had financial irregularities that were self-inflicted. He wasn't exactly known for dotting the i's and crossing the t's."

The Dorchester Conference, the annual Republican gathering in Seaside, didn't invite Sizemore to speak beside this year's other major Republican candidates, Allen Alley, Chris Dudley and John Lim.

Angela Wilhelms, Dorchester's president, says that what many consider the premier Republican event isn't an official party gathering, so there's no obligation to invite everyone.

"We invite everyone who is a viable candidate," Wilhelms says. "And I'm not convinced personally that a candidate going through what he's going through is viable."

Hero to the disaffected

Sizemore's audience has always been voters who are angry and disaffected by government, higher taxes and a sense that citizens no longer control their economic destiny.

Last month, Sizemore won the loudest applause and cheers when he appeared with Alley, Dudley and Lim at a forum in Lake Oswego sponsored by local GOP and conservative groups. And in Prineville on Tuesday night, he won a straw poll at an event sponsored by Central Oregon Patriots.

One of the organizers, Redmond insurance agent Jess Messner, is one of the few people to give Sizemore a \$250 campaign contribution.

Messner says Sizemore has paid a steep personal price.

"He's stood up for my rights for over 20 years," Messner says. "He's stood up for property rights, for parental rights, for a stronger education system and for lower taxes when nobody else would do it. He's taken real chances and not been afraid to put himself out there."

Messner says he isn't concerned at all about the criminal charges Sizemore faces. "It's politics," he says. "One side is just getting a lot dirtier than the other."

Pacific University political scientist Jim Moore says a conservative candidate could threaten to upset a race between two more moderate Republicans such as Alley and Dudley.

But he says Sizemore has shown no signs of creating the needed groundswell.

"To win in politics you've got to be able to put together coalitions," Moore says. "If he's just doing this to be the Don Quixote figure, just focusing on himself isn't going to get him victory."

Dubious honor for state

Moore says Sizemore's candidacy does give the state one dubious honor: "It does put Oregon in the category of places like Illinois and Louisiana that have people under indictment or undergoing trials while taking part in the political process."

The state Department of Justice -- citing Sizemore's past abuses -- sought to put conditions on his candidacy. But Sizemore, representing himself in court, persuaded a judge to let him campaign under the same rules as everyone else.

Sizemore reports that he has been able to raise only \$4,345. By comparison, Dudley, whom Sizemore sees as his chief rival in the race, has raised \$1.3 million.

Sizemore says Dudley can't match his long record of conservative credentials.

"So he was a Blazer, he wasn't really a star, and not that many people pay attention to basketball," Sizemore says. "I probably have the highest name identification in the primary race."

Then he laughs. "Although I'd venture to say that not all of that name identification is positive."

-- **Brent Walth**

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