

Cawley's candidacy prospects get a boost

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The Bucks commissioner received solid support for lieutenant governor in a meeting of county heads.

Bucks County Commissioner Jim Cawley's campaign for lieutenant governor received a boost Wednesday when the Republican Party's Southeast caucus handed him a "solid majority" of votes in a meeting of its five county chairmen.

"The hope is this would catapult his candidacy," said Michael Meehan, the caucus chairman and Cawley supporter. "He's a bright, energetic leader. He's been elected countywide. I think he'd be a welcome addition on the state scene."

Chester County Commissioner Carol Aichele was the only other candidate to receive support, Meehan said.

Aaron Cohen, campaign manager to Cawley, said, "This very clear support shows that Jim is building momentum."

Tom Corbett is the heavy favorite to win the Republican nomination for governor, particularly after Congressman Jim Gerlach's decision to drop out of the race. State Rep. Sam Rohrer of Berks County remains to battle Corbett.

Cawley, 40, and a commissioner since 2005, has endorsed Corbett.

According to the political Web site PA2010, GOP insiders say the list of contenders for the lieutenant governor post has been boiled down to three Republicans from the Southeast, where the Pittsburgh-based Corbett will look for geographic balance: Cawley, Aichele and political operative Joe Watkins.

In considering these three candidates, PA2010 reported, the most important of the caucus straw votes may have been the Central caucus vote last weekend, where the committee members are traditionally more conservative and independent-minded.

Chet Beiler and Nick DiFrancesco split the bulk of the votes, but Watkins led the Southeast candidates with 17 votes, compared to 13 for Cawley and five for Aichele. The lesson for Corbett? Watkins and Cawley may be more acceptable to the party's conservative wing.

"The support Jim received in that vote was big," Cohen said.

Still to vote are regional caucuses in the Northeast, Southwest and Northwest, as well as a regional caucus that stretches around the Southeast and includes parts of the Lehigh Valley and Schuylkill County.

The state committee is expected to vote Feb. 13. An endorsement could follow that vote.

Aside from being first in line if the governor cannot serve, the lieutenant governor has the largely ceremonial role of presiding over the Senate.

The office is traditionally either a reward for political service - i.e. the late Catherine Baker Knoll - or a place to build your resume, a la former Gov. Mark Schweiker, who last week endorsed Cawley.

Another point in Cawley's favor could be Bucks' financial situation. The fourth-largest county by population has not raised taxes since he's been in office, which could be attractive in cash-strapped Harrisburg.

Gary Weckselblatt can be reached at 215-345-3169 or gweckselblatt@phillyburbs.com.

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