

Deseret News

Will Romney be announced as McCain's v.p. this week?

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Deseret News

Published: July 23, 2008

Speculation is swirling that presumptive GOP presidential nominee John McCain is about to name his choice for vice president — and that choice may well be Mitt Romney.

Veteran Washington columnist Bob Novak sparked the latest surge in supposition about what's being called the "veepstakes" by posting an item late Monday saying sources close to the McCain campaign claim the candidate is ready to make an announcement.

Novak said sources close to McCain "are suggesting he will reveal the name of his vice presidential selection this week while Sen. Barack Obama is getting the headlines on his foreign trip."

The widely read columnist went on to say, "The name of McCain's running mate has not been disclosed, but Mitt Romney has led the speculation recently." On Tuesday, though, Novak told Fox News he may have been used by the McCain campaign.

McCain and his aides are being coy with reporters, and Romney, his former rival for the GOP nomination, is said to be spending time with his family at a childhood vacation home located on the Canadian side of the Great Lakes, just across the Michigan border.

Romney's spokesman, Eric Fehrstrom, downplayed the discussion.

"There's a lot of guessing and speculation going on, but the fact is that Governor Romney expects to be campaigning for John McCain as a supporter and not as a member of the ticket," Fehrstrom told the Deseret News in an e-mail Tuesday.

So did Tim Bridgewater, McCain's Utah-based Western states regional coordinator.

"I do not have any information other than I know Mitt Romney and (Minnesota Gov.) Tim Pawlenty, among others, are being considered for the post. The process is further down the road, but I don't have any insight about what's going on this week," Bridgewater said.

But naming a running mate this week may be McCain's best opportunity to upstage presumptive Democratic nominee Barack Obama's newsmaking trip to the Middle East. And Romney seemingly has done everything possible to put himself on the top of McCain's list.

Not only has Romney, a former Massachusetts governor, stumped for McCain in recent weeks on numerous cable news programs, he has also helped raise millions of dollars for his campaign.

That includes \$2 million collected in Utah last May, money that was shared with the GOP. Romney hosted President Bush at private events in Salt Lake City and at his Deer Valley vacation home, where couples paid as much as \$70,000 to attend.

And last week, Romney formally reclassified the \$45 million he loaned his presidential campaign as contributions. That move is seen as clearing the way for him to focus on the GOP ticket's financial needs rather than his own.

Romney, at one time worth an estimated \$350 million thanks to a successful career as a Boston venture capitalist, ran the successful 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. With the economy becoming a top campaign issue, his business expertise is considered a plus.

Finally, Romney could help the GOP carry swing states including Michigan, where his late father, George, served as governor. He is seen as strong in the Intermountain West, because of his

membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"Sometimes the obvious answer is the right one," said Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics and a longtime Romney supporter who now heads Utah Lawyers for McCain.

Jowers said Romney is clearly the most likely choice for McCain.

"There's no other Republican close to Romney right now," Jowers said. "Others have not put in the time and effort that Mitt has."

Other candidates reportedly being considered by McCain for the No. 2 spot include Pawlenty as well as Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal and another former contender for the GOP nomination, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee.

One of McCain's biggest backers in Utah, Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., said Romney has a lot going for him. Huntsman, who bucked the majority of Republicans in the state by supporting McCain early on, has himself been suggested as a potential running mate.

"I'm not there, believe me," Huntsman told the Desert News in a recent interview.

But Romney is definitely high on McCain's list, the governor said. "He's one of the more talented leaders I've ever met and, by any estimation, would have to be a short-list consideration. He has a lot of strengths."

Huntsman, who has campaigned around the country with McCain, said he wasn't sure how Romney's Mormon faith would be weighed in making the decision about who should be the GOP vice-presidential nominee.

"I don't know," the governor said. "You have to do the analysis. You've got certain Western states in which that would be a boon. You have certain Southern states in which that might be a negative."

That's what Romney found during his unsuccessful presidential bid, which ended after a poor Super Tuesday showing on Feb. 5. Romney ran into trouble with evangelical Christians in the South but wowed Mormon voters in the Intermountain West.

Huntsman said the friction between McCain and Romney during the presidential campaign shouldn't be a problem. "Having been around the two of them, I think there is genuine respect and admiration between them," the governor said.

McCain and his aides said little on the campaign trail Tuesday.

"It's the one topic we're forbidden to talk about," said McCain's senior adviser, Mark Salter, according to The Associated Press. Other aides said only that no announcement would be made on Tuesday, raising more questions.

As for McCain, the wire service said he grinned and waved away reporters on the campaign plane during a swing through New Hampshire, jokingly telling them, "What do you want, you little jerks?"

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