**2 years away, but contenders emerging for governor’s race**

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The 2012 election isn’t even done yet, but a lot of buzz is being generated around the next governor’s race.

Several candidates have emerged as potential contenders for governor in 2014. On the Republican side, Secretary of State Ken Bennett, Treasurer Doug Ducey, Attorney General Tom Horne and Mesa Mayor Scott Smith are widely believed to be eying the Ninth Floor. More recently, Senate President Steve Pierce was mentioned as a potential candidate as well.

The race for the Democratic nomination is expected to come down to House Minority Leader Chad Campbell and former Regent Fred DuVal.

Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton is considered a possible contender as well, though many expect Stanton, who took office this year, to take a pass, at least for now.

Several of the candidates acknowledge they’re considering a run.

Smith, whose role in revitalizing Mesa’s economy has been widely praised, said many people have asked him to run and he’s considering it. Campbell, too, said he’s considering a run. Bennett formed an exploratory committee for a gubernatorial campaign in 2011. And Horne said he’s thinking about it as well, though he acknowledged that a gubernatorial run is partly contingent on him being cleared of allegations of wrongdoing.

Others, such as Ducey, DuVal, Pierce and Stanton, would not comment on whether they might run for Gov. Jan Brewer’s seat when she’s termed out in 2014.

Lobbyist Stan Barnes, a former Republican lawmaker, said it’s unusual for there to be so much attention focused on a gubernatorial election so early. But the attention is there, nonetheless, he said.

“There is a strange excitement among the chattering class of Capitol watchers about the 2014 gubernatorial race. I don’t exactly know why it’s as premature on the timeline as it is, but it’s real. And if you ask people who hang around the Capitol, they can rattle off five or six people who are running,” Barnes said.

Ducey said the gubernatorial speculation surrounding him is premature.

“Let’s talk about it next year. I’m focused on defeating Proposition

204 and passing Proposition 118 and getting things done at the Treasurer’s Office,” Ducey said. “Part of the reason people can’t stand politicians is they immediately start planning for what’s next and don’t do the job they were elected to do. I’m focusing on my day job.”

But the lead role Ducey has taken recently in the opposition campaign against Prop. 204 has boosted the visibility of the normally low- profile Treasurer’s Office. Ducey would not say whether he might forgo re-election as treasurer to run for governor. Instead, the former Cold Stone Creamery CEO said only that he’s focused on defeating the ballot initiative for a permanent 1-cent sales tax increase and passing Prop.

118, a measure establishing a permanent fund for a guaranteed annual payment to schools from the state land trust.

Ducey said his role on the No New Taxes, No on 204 campaign is about stopping a bad policy, not setting himself up for a future run for office.

“It’s a billion-dollar permanent sales tax increase annually and forever that will hurt our economy and won’t help education,” he said.

“I’m going to work very hard to defeat Proposition 204 so that we’ll have a better state going forward and the opportunity for tax simplification and education reform remain in front of us.”

Jaime Molera, a Republican lobbyist and consultant, said he doesn’t think Ducey is championing the no-on-204 campaign to boost his chances for a gubernatorial run. “But it doesn’t hurt either,” Molera said.

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No prospective 2014 candidate has been more open about his ambition than Bennett, who formed his “Bennett for Governor” exploratory committee just months after being sworn in for his first full term as secretary of state in 2011. Bennett has been highly visible, releasing a public schedule most weeks and hosting a series of town halls on the 2012 ballot measures.

Bennett, an affable former Senate president, has found himself in the midst of a couple of controversies during the past year. At the request of members of the “birther” movement, he made inquiries to officials in Hawaii about President Barack Obama’s birth certificate.

More recently, he went to court to block Prop. 204 over a discrepancy in the ballot language its supporters filed with his office. Critics charged that both moves were aimed at shoring up conservative support for 2014.

Bennett did not respond to interview requests from the Arizona Capitol Times regarding his potential candidacy in 2014. When he formed his committee in May 2011, he told the Capitol Times that he was exploring the possibility, and that his focus as governor would be strengthening Arizona’s economy.

Barnes said Bennett is “as relevant and as serious a candidate as he’s ever been.”

“He’s got some pretty good profile, and he has a résumé to really be proud of,” Barnes said.

Barnes predicted that Bennett’s missteps, primarily the birther flap, will “fade in the rearview mirror real fast.” Molera agreed, saying it won’t be much of a hindrance in 2014.

“He’s got a little over two years to rectify it,” Molera said. “I think there’s plenty of time to overcome any gaffes.”

Horne said if he had to make a decision today, he’d run for re- election as attorney general and that he won’t make a final decision for a year or so. But he said he’s open to running for governor, and that others have encouraged him to run. Horne said his résumé, which includes experience in all three branches of state government, would make him well-suited to run for governor.

“A lot of people have told me they think I should, which is flattering. It’s kind of a nice pulse on how people feel I’m doing as attorney general. So I haven’t been willing to foreclose it. It’s more just an uncertainty. It’s not something I’m calculating specifically.

My point is to run for re-election,” Horne said.

Horne’s potential candidacy may hinge on the cloud of accusations hanging over him. The FBI and Maricopa County Attorney’s Office are investigating allegations that he illegally collaborated with an independent expenditure committee during his 2010 campaign, and an investigator at the Attorney General’s Office is preparing to file a lawsuit against him alleging retaliatory behavior against her.

“Obviously, I would have to have been vindicated, which seems likely,” he said.

Barnes said the “gossip crowd” has started leaving Horne’s name off the list of potential gubernatorial contenders. But Horne has done a good job as attorney general and if he gets past his current troubles, Barnes said, he’ll be a legitimate candidate.

“I think if they play out and stick, then yes, these legal troubles can be a hindrance,” Barnes said of the allegations against Horne. “If they play out and don’t stick, I think you’ll find him right back on the top of the gossip list on who’s in and who’s out in 2014.”

Smith said a lot of people have asked him to run for governor and that he’s giving it “serious consideration.”

Smith, who is running unopposed for a second term, said Mesa has accomplished a lot in his four years as mayor, including agreements to bring companies such as Able Engineering and First Solar to the city, keeping the Chicago Cubs in town for spring training, revitalizing Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport and hosting a Republican presidential debate at the Mesa Arts Center.

Between that and his record in the private sector, Smith said people are taking note.

“I’ve been approached by a lot of people, and I’m honored by that. But I look at why they’re talking to me and I’ve got to look at what we’ve been able to accomplish in Mesa. And I think that’s led people to wonder if what we’ve accomplished in Mesa and what we’ve done can be expanded statewide,” he said. “I will look at it seriously. I have no idea what the answer will be, but I’m going to spend the next however long it takes to truly look and see whether that would be right for me, my family, and whether I think that is something that would benefit the state.”

Barnes described Smith as a pragmatist who’s “low on political speak and high on plain language.”

“Smith has done what people thought could not be done, which is make Mesa look progressive and sexy. And that’s a big deal. He’s done really well,” Barnes said.

Pierce is more of a newcomer to the list of potential candidates, Barnes said. But Molera said the Prescott rancher should be taken seriously. He has a strong record as Senate president, good ties to the business community and a demonstrated fundraising record, Molera said. Pierce has raised more than $400,000 for the Republican Victory Fund, an independent expenditure aimed at getting GOP senators elected in November.

Pierce said the only thing he’s focused on now and is getting re- elected to the Senate, retaining his job as Senate president and getting other Republicans elected.

“I’m working on one thing at a time,” Pierce said. “Anything on down the road you can’t even talk about, because it’s not in the plans, no.”

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Campbell, too, said his primary focus in on getting re-elected. But he said he’s considering a run for governor.

The Phoenix lawmaker has been one of the state’s most high-profile Democrats for the past couple years, and said his track record shows how he would operate as governor. He noted that legislative Democrats last session crafted a budget proposal and nearly struck a deal with the Republican majority, which he described as “unheard of for a minority party.”

“I think my leadership at the Legislature has shown what I want to do for the state and shows, I think, what my ideas are and my outlook for the state,” Campbell said. “As a minority caucus, we’ve fought the extremism down at the state the last couple of years. I’ve been probably the most outspoken and vocal critic of Governor Brewer for the past couple years.”

DuVal, a longtime Democratic operative who served as chief of staff to former Gov. Bruce Babbitt in the 1980s, was an aide to President Clinton, and served in the State Department, would not comment on the possibility of running in two years, saying only that the campaign for Prop. 204 has his full attention right now.

Molera said DuVal could position himself as a fiscal moderate and social liberal, a strong position for a Democrat. He also said DuVal’s decades of connections, including ties to Texas oilman T. Boone Pickens, could be a boon for fundraising.

Democrats like Campbell and DuVal are fighting a perception that the party doesn’t have a deep bench for 2014. Democratic lobbyist Mario Diaz, however, disagreed. Diaz said Campbell has done a good job as minority leader and as a fundraiser for the Democrats’ legislative victory fund, which reported raising nearly $200,000 by late August.

And DuVal, he said, is a “money vacuum cleaner” with a deep list of contacts.

Campbell and DuVal are expected to take the plunge, but others are unsure about Stanton, a rising star in the Arizona Democratic Party.

Barnes said he’ll face a lot of pressure from other Democrats to run.

“There are going to be a lot of people knocking on Greg Stanton’s door talking about how the party needs him,” Barnes said.

A Stanton spokesman wouldn’t comment on Stanton’s political future, saying only that he loves his job as mayor. But Diaz said he doesn’t expect to see the mayor on the ballot in two years.

“I’m sure that he may have some interest for down the line, but not for 2014,” Diaz said.

Molera also said he doubts Stanton will get into the race.

“He’s a sharp guy, and building a strong base in Phoenix will make him very formidable down the road,” he said.

The biggest X-factor for the 2014 race may be a 2012 ballot initiative, not a candidate. Proposition 121 would eliminate partisan primaries and create a “top-two” primary system in which all candidates for an office would appear on the same ballot, and the top two vote-getters would advance to the general election, regardless of party affiliation.

Republican consultant Chip Scutari said it’s impossible to tell how the new system would alter the race. Scutari said the advantage will go to candidates and consultants who most quickly figure out how to use the new system, much as former Democratic Gov. Janet Napolitano was able to take advantage of the then-new Clean Elections system in 2002.

“It’s not the typical calculations. People are going to have to figure out,” Scutari said. “I think this time around there’s going to have to be some savvy political consultants determining the ebb and flow, the nuances, of the top-two primary.”

“That’s really one of the wild cards of the 2014 governor’s race.”