

Texas prepares for Hutchison-Perry battle

GOP heavyweights to vie for Lone Star state governor

July 21, 2009

Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison has long had her political sights set on being governor, only to be told it was not her time. She's not waiting any longer. The four-term lawmaker is gearing up to challenge fellow Republican and arch-rival Gov. Rick Perry, who is seeking an unprecedented third full term next year.

The March primary contest between the state's two most powerful leaders is shaping up to be an epic showdown as big, brawling and feisty as the state of Texas itself. It will likely be nasty to boot, an intra-party clash that will gobble up tens of millions of dollars in campaign money in a critical midterm election year when the Republican Party will be struggling to make a political comeback nationally.

"She's raised a lot of money and is popular in Texas, but a lot of people here would prefer they not run against each other. But at the moment, they seem committed to making the race," said veteran Republican campaign strategist Tom Pauken, who chairs the Texas Workforce Commission.

"The governor's been here a long time and they've been enemies for a long time. Some of her supporters are his former supporters, and she has a lot of support from the Bush Republicans in Texas. But he draws support from a lot of the conservative base and from social conservatives, too." Mr. Pauken said.

Mrs. Hutchison, 66, the first woman ever elected to the Senate from Texas, won't be up for re-election until 2012. She said in a brief pre-announcement last week that she is running because "I love Texas and I know we can do better."

Singling out "key challenges" for the state, including property taxes, education, private property rights, utility and insurance rates and health care, she said, "We need results, not politics." She intends to make a formal announcement of her candidacy in August.

Party strategists say her profile as a moderate-to-conservative Republican could hurt her in a primary dominated by the party's conservative base, particularly her vote for last year's \$700 billion bank bailout bill that angered Texas conservatives and that Mr. Perry vigorously opposed. "That's why they call her Kay Bailout," an aide to the governor said.

Mr. Perry, 59, has carved out a reputation as a fiscal conservative who has balanced the state's budget, built up a large rainy-day fund to carry the state through the recession, and has been successful in bringing thousands of jobs to Texas. The state's 7.5 percent unemployment rate is well below the 9.5 percent national average.

Both candidates remain popular among voters, with approval ratings above 70 percent. Veteran strategists in both camps say they expect a down-to-the-wire race.

"This is going to be a very close primary race. It's going to be tough and bruising. It's going to be unlike anything that anyone has seen before in Texas," said a senior Republican Party official who has close ties to the Texas political establishment.