

FRONTRUNNER HATCH HAS HIS WORK CUT OUT FOR HIM

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By most estimates, Attorney General Mike Hatch heads to the Democratic-Farmer-Labor state convention this weekend in Rochester as the front-runner for his party's endorsement for governor.

He should be. Hatch is the DFL's best-known political leader, its highest state office-holder and its all-time leading vote-getter. But he's no shoo-in. He will have to fight to win the endorsement.

Why? Because Hatch is a bare-knuckled political street fighter who, during a quarter century as a major player in Minnesota politics, has made a lot of enemies.

As state DFL chairman in the early 1980s, he waged a campaign - largely unsuccessful - to weaken the grip that abortion-rights and anti-abortion factions had on the party and shift its focus to more bread-and-butter issues.

After serving as Gov. Rudy Perpich's commerce commissioner for seven years, he ran against Perpich in the 1990 DFL primary and lost. Four years later, he challenged another DFL gubernatorial endorsee, state Sen. John Marty, in the primary and lost again.

He finally won an election in 1998 - after upsetting state Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge, the DFL-endorsed candidate for attorney general, in another primary.

Hatch, 57, of Burnsville, has a history of bucking the party establishment that will control the convention this weekend.

"Mike has burned a lot of bridges over the years," Democratic National Committee member Jackie Stevenson of Minnetonka said earlier this week.

Hatch's enemies generally fall into two categories, said veteran

Democratic political strategist Bob Meek. One is powerful institutions, such as insurance companies, big banks, hospital chains and other large health care organizations. First as commerce commissioner and now as attorney general, he has aggressively battled those powerful interests, ostensibly on behalf of consumers.

The second group that Hatch has offended, Meek said, is "party insiders," especially "elitist liberals." He has challenged their endorsement process and never championed their pet social issues, such as abortion rights or gay rights. Instead, he has concentrated on issues closer to the hearts of blue-collar and rural Democrats, such as jobs, education, health care and - unlike many liberals - gun rights.

"Mike knows rough-and-tumble politics," Meek said. "He's brash, ambitious; some people call him ruthless."

But he said Hatch sees himself using that hard-hitting style to "represent folks who otherwise don't get represented." He stands up for the little guy, and that's what endears him to many rank-and-file Democrats.

At the DFL convention, Hatch will compete for the endorsement with state Sens. Becky Lourey and Steve Kelley. Perennial candidate Ole Savior also is running but has never garnered much delegate support.

Hatch declined to reveal his delegate count but said he accepts others' judgment that he's the front-runner. "I hope to get (the endorsement). I expect to get it, but that doesn't mean I will," he said.

Republicans clearly expect him to be the DFL candidate, They created a Web site, www.mikeunhatched.com, last year to attack his record and didn't do the same for Lourey or Kelley.

"Everybody assumed he was the Leading contender," said state GOP Chairman Ron Carey.

If Hatch isn't endorsed, he says he still would run in the Sept. 12 DFL primary if he receives "significant commitment and support" from delegates, contributors, elected officials and other party activists.

His supporters predict he will be endorsed.

"The delegates want to win," said former Gov. Wendell Anderson, who has been phoning delegates on behalf of Hatch. "I think he clearly has demonstrated that he's the most electable candidate." State Sen. Ann

Rest, DFL-New Hope, counts herself as a friend and admirer of Lourey and Kelly. But she said choosing Hatch for governor was easy.

"I think he's our strongest candidate with the strongest personality and message," she said.

There's another practical reason why delegates will support Hatch, former state DFL Chairman Rick Stafford said. "He's the only DFL candidate who can raise the money it's going to take to beat an incumbent Republican governor."

Hatch wouldn't say how much he has raised, but Stafford said his campaign has \$1 million in the bank.

Hatch grew up in Duluth but spent summers at his grandmother's house in Battle Lake. Hence his strong attachment to greater Minnesota, he said.

After graduating from Duluth East High School, he enrolled at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, but he disliked college, so he joined the Merchant Marine and sailed the Great Lakes for more than nine months. After deciding he wanted to do more with his life, he returned to UMD, earned a bachelor's degree with honors and then enrolled at the University of Minnesota Law School.

He earned his law degree in 1973, and then went to work as a trial lawyer specializing in commercial law and quickly became active in DFL politics. In addition to practicing law, he has spent the past three decades climbing the political ladder. He has probably spent more nights and weekends at small DFL gatherings across the state than all the other candidates combined.

Asked during an interview in his Capitol office why he's running for governor, Hatch replied, "Because this place is a mess." He said Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty and the Legislature have "almost a Ferris Bueller mentality," referring to the 1986 film about a teenager who takes a day off from school to goof off.

Hatch accused Pawlenty of governing by proclamations, press releases and "nonstop baubles," such as pursuing casinos, hyping wedge issues such as gay marriage and forcing lengthy litigation over whether a tobacco charge was a tax or a fee, "all because of the public relations value of the no-new-tax pledge."

If elected, Hatch said, he would try to roll back the 50 percent tuition increases at state colleges and universities during Pawlenty's first *term*. He would take aggressive steps to hold down soaring health care costs. He would require health care providers to cover treatment of mental illness, which he called a leading cause of street crime.

He called for greater investments in stem cell research and fiber-optic communications systems. He wants colleges to better train students for

the high-skill jobs that baby boomers will soon vacate. He would speed up development of mass transit in the Twin Cities.

And he asserted he could do it all without a tax increase.

"We are not going to increase taxes," he said emphatically. Instead, he said he would collect an additional \$1 billion in revenue through stricter auditing procedures to catch tax dodgers and gather another \$275 million by closing a tax loophole for foreign-operating corporations.

Can he do that? The 1,488 DFL convention delegates will deliver the first verdict on Hatch and his plan this weekend.

MIKE HATCH

Age: 57

Hometown: Lives in Burnsville; born in Des Moines, Iowa; grew up in Duluth.

Family: Wife, Patti; three adult daughters.

Education: Bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota-Duluth; law degree from the University of Minnesota.

Employment: Practiced law in Minneapolis, 1973-83 and 1990-98; state commerce commissioner, 1983-90; attorney general, 1999-present.

Political experience: 2nd Congressional District DFL chairman, 1978-80; state DFL chairman, 1980-83; DFL candidate for governor in 1990 and 1994 primaries.

Something you didn't know: The late Johnny Cash is the only celebrity who ever endorsed Hatch.