

EXCLUSIVE: Tommy Thompson, Tim Michels Agree Only One Of Them Will Run For Governor

By Mark Belling, WISN-AM

Former Governor Tommy Thompson and pipeline company executive Tim Michels have agreed that only one of them will enter the Republican race for governor of Wisconsin. It is overwhelmingly likely that one of the two will indeed get into the race, upsetting what had appeared to be a rather easy path to the nomination for former Lieutenant Governor Rebecca Kleefisch.

Sources tell me Thompson and Michels met late last week and agreed it would be suicidal for both of their chances if they both ran. There is no agreement that I am aware of as to which one will run.

This sets up a massive showdown between supporters of the two most prominent Republican Wisconsin governors in the past half century. Kleefisch has the support of almost all of the old Scott Walker crowd. Those still loyal to Thompson will back him, or Michels.

Still in the race are businessman and activist Kevin Nicholson and State Rep. Tim Ramthun although Ramthun's campaign appears to be fizzling.

Thompson has been a state GOP leader for more than forty years. He was the state assembly Republican leader when he ran for governor in 1986, unseating incumbent Democrat Tony Earl. He was reelected by landslides in 1990, 1994 and 1998 before resigning in 2001 to join the administration of new President George W. Bush. After leaving the Bush administration, Thompson got involved in several health care companies but made a return to politics when he ran in 2012 against Democrat Tammy Baldwin for the US Senate. That was the year Barack Obama won an easy national reelection and swept in lots of Democrats with him. Most recently, Thompson has served as interim president of the UW System.

Michels has been a behind the scenes GOP force for decades and himself once eyed a US Senate bid. His family owns the Michels Corporation, one of the world's largest pipeline and infrastructure contractors with headquarters in Brownsville and Milwaukee. Michels has been a member of numerous GOP task forces on energy and infrastructure issues. He would have the ability to pump millions into his campaign and that's critical because the August primary is only four months away.

I reported Friday that Beloit multi-billionaire Diane Hendricks, who has been a Kleefisch backer, has apparently jumped ship as she is now urging Thompson to run. Hendricks is somewhat tight with former President Donald Trump and was one of his biggest 2020 donors. Hendricks accompanied Thompson on a recent meeting with Trump in Palm Beach. If Hendricks has a preference between Michels and Thompson, don't be surprised if her chosen candidate is the one who ends up running.

Who will Trump endorse? It's hard to say but it's a safe bet he'll go with the candidate he thinks is likeliest to win.

The motivation for all of this GOP interest is the widespread belief that Democrat Tony Evers is very vulnerable. The entire Republican ticket can expect a boost from Senator Ron Johnson's reelection campaign as Johnson seems well-positioned to win and will face a very weak Democrat opponent. The Wisconsin governorship is one of the most powerful in the country and is tantalizing for politicians.

Still, Kleefisch has been working on this for nearly four years and appeared to be getting the endorsements of virtually every breathing Republican in the state. But the interest by Michels and Thompson has put a giant boulder in Kleefisch's path.

Why has Hendricks moved away from Kleefisch? Why is Kleefisch's momentum stalled? GOP sources tell me many were underwhelmed by Kleefisch's most recent fundraising report. Polling has also shown her unable to overtake Evers. With Republicans obsessed with winning in 2022, any perception that Kleefisch can't beat Evers is going to create interest in finding somebody else.

Thompson is 80 years old and has not won a Wisconsin election in 24 years. Michels has never been elected to anything. Kleefisch, on the other hand, has personally met virtually every Republican in the state. She might still be the favorite. But her campaign is clearly flawed and the fact that both Thompson and Michels are jockeying to get into the race is a sign they believe Kleefisch can be beaten in the August primary.

It is likely that either Thompson or Michels will enter the race in a week.

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