

Deseret News

AP Interview: Sen.-elect Paul readies budget plan

By Roger Alford

Associated Press

Published: Friday, Dec. 10, 2010 4:51 p.m. MST

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. — Sen.-elect Rand Paul doesn't yet have a full Capitol staff and is still seeing patients from his Kentucky medical practice.

But that hasn't stopped the Republican tea party favorite from starting work on a balanced budget proposal that he plans to present in his first month in office.

"People have looked at the numbers for a long time," Paul told The Associated Press in an interview this week. "It's not like I'm going to go up there and start with absolutely no information. We're already talking to different people from the think tanks and have been for sometime trying to come up with proposals."

Paul, the son of U.S. Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, easily defeated Democratic attorney general Jack Conway last month to capture the Senate seat of outgoing Sen. Jim Bunning.

Paul survived a blitz of TV attack ads alleging that he was involved in a college prank that involved tying up a woman and telling her he worshipped an idol called "Aqua Buddha" — charges he denied.

"Some things you can laugh about in retrospect," Paul, 47, said. "I mean, who prays to any idol, much less a water deity known as Aqua Buddha. The more outlandish an attack becomes, the easier it is to fend it off."

Now Paul is onto the business of governing.

"I think there's never been a time in our history when the American public was more ready to hear about how we fix the system," Paul said.

The fiscal conservative campaigned on balancing the budget as he tapped into voter concerns about runaway federal spending.

Relaxing in his office after a morning with patients, Paul leafed through budget-related documents. He is planning to push for a constitutional amendment to require a balanced budget as well as his own plan for erasing the federal deficit. Paul said he has been going over proposals from the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, conservative policy groups.

So far, Paul has hired only two aides: Doug Stafford, a longtime Washington political operative who served as a political consultant during the campaign, as chief of staff, and Cayce Moffett, a campaign intern, as deputy chief of staff.

Those positions are the only two that Paul can fill before he is sworn in on Jan. 5. But he already has selected people to fill other key jobs, including former Kentucky Republican Party spokeswoman Moira Bagley as communications director and Laurel County GOP Chairman Brian Mills as state political director. Paul also has invited Bunning's legislative director, William Henderson, to join his staff.

With his white coat hanging in the lobby of his clinic, a relaxed Paul chats candidly, the hoarseness that plagued him during the campaign now gone as he discusses his transition from eye surgeon to senator. He will be part of a fledgling tea party caucus founded by a handful of new senators who won seats in November.

University of Kentucky political scientist Stephen Voss said Paul has access to volumes of work by financial experts to use in drafting his balanced budget proposal, so filing legislation in January "is perfectly doable."

"Obviously, a budget will be stronger if you get good information from the agencies who implement it," Voss said. "But there are scholars who have been churning out different ideas on budget reductions for many years."

Paul, who rose in two years from the ranks of a relatively unknown Kentucky political outsider to senator-elect by tapping into the tea party movement, is counting on a partnership with other new arrivals to press for conservative causes. The tea party senators, he said, will include voters in the legislative process.

"Instead of a caucus that just meets and decides what we want to do, we're going to have a meeting, invite the grass roots up from all over the United States, then broadcast our meeting out," Paul said. "The whole idea of the tea party is not that we're telling them what to do, it's bringing them together to tell us what they want to do. It really is trying to embrace some of the grass roots-up phenomenon of the tea party."

Paul said government reforms, including term limits and waiting periods before bill votes, will be among the first issues the caucus will tackle.

Momentum, Paul said, is in the tea party's favor following November midterm elections that signaled the electorate wants change. Already, Senate Republicans such as Minority Leader Mitch McConnell have renounced earmarks that Paul and other tea party candidates attacked as wasteful during their campaigns.

"I'd like to capitalize on the earmarking victory, and then move on to some other things," Paul said. "I think we have to talk about some specific ways to cut spending, and have a bill that cuts spending."

For years, Paul has crusaded against spending policies at all levels of government, showing up periodically on Kentucky television programs to espouse his philosophy of smaller government. He understands that the debate over such cuts will generate public outcry each time that particular programs, especially entitlements, are scrutinized for waste.

Paul said he's certain the tea party can win passage of a balanced budget constitutional amendment.

"I don't think there'll be a vote against it," he said told the AP.

Though McConnell, Kentucky's senior U.S. senator, supported one of Paul's opponents in the Republican primary, Paul said they have made amends and that the two will work closely.

"We've had several good conversations, and I think we'll have a great working relationship," Paul said. "He says he wants it that way, and I do too."

Paul said he also has had a cordial conversation with President Barack Obama, who called him at his medical clinic in November. Paul said he chatted with Obama about the tea party, hoping to allay misconceptions that it is a mean-spirited group.

"We disagree with the president on a lot of issues, and I haven't been afraid to say that, and will continue to say that," Paul said. "But I think you can, like he said, disagree without being disagreeable. He knows we're concerned about the debt, and he says he is, too."

© 2010 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved