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Libertarian presidential ticket pledges balanced budget, entitlement reform

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SALT LAKE CITY — Libertarian presidential hopeful Gary Johnson and running mate William Weld have a vision of what their first 100 days in office would look like: A wide highway cutting down the middle of partisan politics on its way to a balanced budget and entitlement reform.

In a conversation with the Deseret News and KSL editorial boards Friday, the third-party candidates voiced confidence that their departure from politics as usual will appeal to voters in Utah and elsewhere, giving them a legitimate chance at winning the White House.

As their campaign has gained traction, curiosity has grown concerning whether the state's voters could choose the fiscally conservative but socially liberal ticket.

"We wouldn't do this if we didn't think we genuinely had a chance to win," Johnson said.

In their first 100 days in office, the two former governors pledge to submit a balanced budget to Congress, Johnson said, calling concern of a fiscal cliff "the biggest issue facing our country right now."

Specifically, Johnson proposed shifting Medicaid and Medicare dollars out of federal hands to individual states, creating 50 practical labs to develop options for reforming the long-standing entitlement programs and drawing new lines of eligibility.

It's an approach Johnson said he wishes he could have taken during his two terms as governor of New Mexico.

"Let the states decide, believing the federal government incapable of coming up with a one-size-fits-all," he said. "In my opinion, that's how we see our way through this."

Some states would fail, demonstrating steps to avoid, while successes would be emulated, Johnson said.

Weld recounted his experience rebuilding Massachusetts' budget from the ground up as governor with no consideration for "sacred cows," especially considering he didn't know there were any.

Weld noted that the Cato Institute and Wall Street Journal called him, along with Democratic Wyoming Gov. Mike Sullivan, the most fiscally conservative governors in the country in 1992.

"Nobody can deny that we changed our states, so that is a 'we can deliver,' and that's never going to be more important than in the first 100 days," Weld said.

Also to be considered would be Social Security, which Johnson says is "approaching insolvency," and a hard look at military spending to maintain a superior global force without unnecessary costs.

Friendly rapport with Romney, praise for Leavitt

The candidates, who paint their ticket as a co-presidency, also discussed their friendly rapport with adopted Utahn and former presidential candidate Mitt Romney, who they are still courting for an endorsement, and praise for former Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt.

Both men, they said, would be top additions to their presidential Cabinet.

"If Mitt Romney wants to be a part of the administration, that would be a guarantee," Johnson promised, though voicing doubt whether he would be interested.

Asked what role the Utah favorite would play in the administration, Johnson said Romney would essentially have his choice of jobs, citing his business and Olympic organizing experience. Weld echoed that he has always thought Romney would make a strong fit for defense as well as domestic roles.

Johnson then brought up Leavitt, who led Romney's potential transition team in 2012, as "the ideal secretary of state."

Weld quickly agreed, calling Leavitt one of the most level-headed and calm people he has met in politics.

As they move closer to possibly being included in upcoming presidential debates, Weld predicted that recognition, fundraising and support for their candidacy will only continue to build, and with that could come more public support from figures like Romney, his fellow former Massachusetts governor.

Medical marijuana, religious liberty

Johnson and Weld also addressed stances on medical marijuana and religious liberty, two sticking points with Utah voters seeking an alternative to the Democratic nominee, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, or the GOP candidate, bombastic businessman Donald Trump.

A longtime supporter of legalizing marijuana, Johnson maintained his stance that the issue should be left to individual states to govern. He argued that legal marijuana is safer than both

alcohol and prescription drugs, has a growing role in medicine and is increasingly supported nationwide.

"Look, live your life as you see fit, but if you do in fact consume marijuana and don't do any harm to anyone else, arguably, except yourself, is that criminal? And I suggest that it's not," Johnson said.

Weld added that while he couldn't care less about marijuana, he saw the extensive resources that went into criminally charging Americans for even minor drug offenses, specifically marijuana, during his time as a federal prosecutor under Republican President Ronald Reagan.

After last month calling religious freedom "a black hole", Johnson on Friday reiterated comments he has made since then in an op-ed for the Deseret News praising Utah for balancing religious rights and anti-discrimination against lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender people in a 2015 law. His stance will always be one that promotes equality in all kinds of social issues and fights discrimination, he said.

"A lot of the religious freedom legislation that is passing in various states, in my opinion, is just a way to discriminate against the LGBT communities," Johnson said, comparing the issue to laws passed discriminating against black Americans following the Civil War.

"From my standpoint, I don't want to be any part of discrimination," Johnson said.

Both elected as Republicans in traditionally blue states, Johnson and Weld see a Libertarian White House as a remedy for Washington gridlock. In an already deeply polarized political climate, electing either Clinton or Trump would only push the divide deeper than ever, Johnson said.

"By no figment of the imagination are the two sides going to come together if either one of them are elected," Johnson said. "So you elect the two of us, big six-lane highway down the middle. ... We're going to have a bipartisan administration. Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians."