Will ART Torpedo Berry's Political Future?

BY JOE MONAHAN



Why would a Republican mayor alienate so many business-owning Republicans along Central Avenue, even as he floats the idea of running for the 2018 GOP gubernatorial nomination? After all, restaurant owners such as Larry and Dorothy Rainosek, owners of the iconic Frontier, are major contributors to Republican causes and candidates. Ditto for Tom Tinnin, owner of a stretch of property near Highland High School and like the Rainoseks ardently opposed to ART.

No reliable polling has been done on how Berry's core GOP constituency feels about ART, but it's not a stretch to say the overwhelming majority are opposed to the $119 million rapid bus project. Remember how they cheered in 2009 when then mayoral candidate Berry blasted Mayor Marty Chavez for proposing a "street car" down the very same stretch of Central where Berry wants to run ART buses? That anti-transit position was key to getting Berry into a mayoral runoff with Chavez and going on to defeat him.

Berry's zealousness in completing ART over the strenuous objections of his own political base prompted this newspaper to editorialize that Berry was pushing through an ill-advised project because some of the millions of dollars earned by ART contractors will end up in Berry's future gubernatorial campaign kitty. Or maybe it will be a different kitty?

Berry has so alienated his GOP base that the likely gubernatorial run of Lt. Gov. John Sanchez and the possible candidacy of southern GOP Congressman Steve Pearce loom large. For Berry, there are three choices: retire from politics, run for governor, or seek a third term as mayor.

Retirement does not seem to be in the cards as he is known to have widely talked of his political future. Running for governor is still on the table, but if Berry is serious, he may be the only one in the room who sees a clear path to the GOP nomination in the aftermath of ART and the disastrous management of APD. Then there's mayor, a job he has said he would not seek again but that could be his most likely route, opines Pete Dinelli, a former Albuquerque city councilor and 2013 mayoral hopeful.

Veteran politics watchers say the Democrats, the City Council and the media have pretty much given Berry a free ride, enabling him to keep his approval rating above 50 percent. A run for governor could be ill-fated from the start as Berry would be subjected to vigorous attacks from the dominant conservative statewide wing of the GOP. He'd face far fewer hurdles if he sought a third mayoral term.

Berry would no longer get a free ride from the Dems if he reversed course and sought four more years at City Hall, but Democrats are more likely than the Rs to split the vote among themselves (as they did in 2009), giving Berry a head start in making a runoff election or securing the 50 percent of the vote necessary to avoid one.

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Then there's the matter of money. As he did in 2013, Berry would likely opt to privately finance his campaign, raising north of $1 million for October 2017's election. Some Democrats would try the same, but it's more difficult for them.

The City Council recently approved a measure that, if approved by voters, would nearly double the amount a publicly financed candidate could receive for a mayoral run from $362,000 to $630,000. That's a fairly large sum that would enable a candidate to compete with Berry's seven-figure treasury. The wrinkle is whether the Bernalillo County Commission will place the measure on the November ballot. They meet to decide the issue later this month. If they decide they can't find space for it, getting it approved in time for next year's election gets complicated.

There is yet another wrinkle in the politics of ART. If the project survives court challenges and construction begins in September, a year from now, both the construction and the mayoral campaign will be fully under way. We'll know whether it caused the predicted traffic chaos and business failures. That outcome could have a large say in determining Berry's political future.

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