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Gates May Run for the Governorship : Chief Considering Race--but Only if Deukmejian Drops Out

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SACRAMENTO — Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl F. Gates said Tuesday that he might run for governor if Gov. George Deukmejian decides not to seek a third term in 1990.

Gates, 62, who toyed with running for Los Angeles mayor in 1981 and 1985 before dropping the idea each time, confirmed that he has been approached by Republican campaign contributors who have urged him to run for governor if Deukmejian does not.

Asked in a telephone interview how seriously he would consider entering the race, Gates replied: "It would depend on how serious the people are who are asking me and how much support there is. I'm not the least bit interested unless there's great interest in me. But if there's genuine support and enthusiasm, yeah, I'd be interested.

"I'm not interested in tilting at windmills. It's got to be something doable or I wouldn't waste my time."

Referring to Deukmejian, Gates said: "I hope he does run. He'd do a super job as a third-termer. But people have told me they don't think he's going to run . . . They've asked if I would consider it . . . Being governor of this state, the greatest state in the union, how could one not be interested if there's a possibility?"

Deukmejian currently is trying to decide whether to run for a third term. A decision had been expected by mid-December, but recently the governor and his advisers have been talking about an announcement late this month or early next.

Some people close to the governor say that he seems to be leaning against running. At a meeting last Wednesday of major GOP financial contributors at a Los Angeles Airport hotel, Deukmejian left the impression with several people that he probably will not run, according to one participant who asked not to be identified.

"We met to take his temperature on where he's going," said the businessman. "Since the governor did not assertedly say, 'I need your help,' and went through a litany of how he needs to reconcile his personal life--he doesn't have a lot of money, he has kids in college--with the idea of running again, a lot of people came away thinking he wasn't running. I personally had the feeling he was just being forthcoming. I know his closest advisers, and they don't know what he's going to do."

Deukmejian met the next night in Laguna Niguel with the state Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors and left a different impression, the same source said. "Those people came away feeling he hadn't made up his mind," he said.

Difficult Decision

The 60-year-old governor is torn, intimates say, between a desire to walk away from the constant political warfare between himself and the Democratic Legislature, and the lure of continuing to fight for his Republican agenda. On the one hand, there is the attraction of making big money in private law practice; on the other, he feels party pressure to try to maintain GOP possession of the governor's office for the post-1990 reapportionment of legislative and congressional districts.

Until now, most speculation about a potential Republican gubernatorial candidate--if Deukmejian does not run--has centered on state Senate Republican Leader Ken Maddy of Fresno and retiring U.S. Rep. Daniel E. Lungren of Long Beach. Two other GOP names frequently are mentioned--U.S. Sen. Pete Wilson and baseball Commissioner Peter Ueberroth--but neither has publicly indicated an interest in running.

A Maddy adviser, who did not want to be identified, said Tuesday that the Senate GOP leader probably will run for governor if Deukmejian does not. Maddy ran unsuccessfully for the party's gubernatorial nomination in 1978 and "we've always stayed ready" for a second bid, the aide said.

But Maddy is not talking publicly about entering the race. "It would seem awfully opportunistic for him to run around saying 'If the governor doesn't run, I will,' " the strategist said. "It'd be like you're shoving him out the door."

Sees Another Prize

A close adviser to Lungren, however, said the retiring congressman probably would run for state attorney general rather than governor, believing he would have a better chance of winning the lesser office. "Dan would look at the governor's race. His heart would be in it, but his head would be into running for AG," said the aide.

Among Democrats, State Atty. Gen. John K. Van de Kamp has said that he intends to run. Also strongly considering the race is State Controller Gray Davis. Former San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein also is contemplating it.

Gates would not identify the GOP donors who approached him. "They asked, 'Could we just float your name around with some people who raise funds?' and I said, 'Be my guest,' " the chief said. "They talked to me later and said they had floated my name and gotten only two negatives."

One person "floating" Gates name is Eric Rose, a former political aide to State Sen. Ed Davis (R-Valencia), whom Gates succeeded 11 years ago as police chief. Rose would not identify any of the "35 to 40" people he said are pushing Gates to run. But Rose now works for Richard Fore, who served various roles in the Nixon, Ford and Reagan administrations and currently is a partner in various Los Angeles County real estate investments.

'A Few Heavy Hitters'

"We have the people--quite a few heavy hitters--but no one wants to move on it until the day after the governor announces he isn't going to run," Rose said. "They'd have egg on their face if they decided to support Daryl Gates prematurely and tomorrow the governor decided to run for reelection."

Rose added, "People are going out in this world with blinders on hoping George Deukmejian may run again. But no one is preparing for the possibility he won't."

As for the police chief, Rose asserted: "He's very excited about the prospect of running for governor. However, he doesn't want to be perceived as trying to pressure the governor in anyway."

Clearly, Gates' political strength would be his appeal to voters concerned about crime, just as Deukmejian--a former state attorney general--has appealed to such voters in his gubernatorial campaigns.

A survey of 650 Los Angeles city residents by The Times Poll in March found that Gates had a strong job approval rating--61% approving of his performance as police chief, 16% not approving and 23% not sure.