

LOS ANGELES

Pressure for special election Conservatives say backing off now is not an option

- Carla Marinucci, Chronicle Political Writer
Tuesday, June 7, 2005

Los Angeles -- Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's push for a special election has fired up California conservatives to such an extent that a retreat now could be devastating to the governor's political future and to his party, Republican grassroots activists and conservative leaders warn.

"There's no turning back," said Thomas Del Becarro, chair of the Contra Costa County GOP and publisher of PoliticalVanguard.com, a conservative news and commentary Web site. "At this point, the momentum for reform continues to build, and the grassroots' hearts and minds are into this election -- as much as it was for the recall."

"If it doesn't happen, the governor has a credibility issue," agreed Jon Fleischman, a GOP campaign strategist and publisher of the Flashreport, a roundup on California politics. "The soldiers are wanting to be deployed -- and if the governor calls the retreat, that demoralizes the soldiers."

The no-nonsense outlook from conservative GOP loyalists came at the inaugural meeting Saturday of the new state chapter of the Club for Growth -- a supply-side, anti-tax political action committee that has raised millions of dollars for conservative causes nationwide. Much like the abortion rights powerhouse Emily's List at the other end of the political spectrum, the organization's goal is to bundle political contributions to help candidates and causes that support its causes -- in this case, an anti-tax agenda of "liberty, opportunity and taming the government 'monster.' "

The weekend's meeting brought some 300 activists to the Crowne Plaza Hotel to listen to a roster of high-profile speakers -- including pollster Dick Morris and Stephen Moore, one of the founders of the national Club for Growth -- who assessed the GOP outlook across the nation and prepared the party's loyalist troops for the fight ahead in California.

The governor for months has said he intends to go to the voters to make changes in the state budget process, redistricting procedures and the way public school teachers earn tenure.

Schwarzenegger has faced an organized and determined opposition on these measures. Groups such as teachers and nurses have protested his appearances and have broadcasted political ads as if already in the late stages of a campaign.

The governor's decision to go forward with an election -- should he choose to -- carries political risks. If he loses, the governor's ability to push the Democratic-controlled Legislature will be severely weakened, and analysts say his potential opponents in next



year's re-election campaign will be emboldened.

With just days until Schwarzenegger's deadline for calling a November special election, many of this weekend's speakers at the conservative gathering drew cheers by urging them to put their checkbooks -- and their grassroots organizational skills -- behind the governor's proposed ballot measures. The group also rallied behind the "paycheck protection" issue, which is intended to curb the political clout of Democratic-allied unions and could qualify for the special election ballot.

"What's at stake is either reform or higher taxes," said Joel Fox, a Schwarzenegger adviser and co-chair of the Citizens to Save California, a fund-raising committee working to support the governor's measures. The final decision to hold a special election remains with the governor, he said, but "It's a great opportunity -- like a 100-year flood ... and I think he will do it."

Schwarzenegger has recently been battered by falling numbers in polls and has lost ground among moderates and independents, but the enthusiasm at the weekend gathering was evidence the governor still has overwhelming support among conservatives. Even in California, a state dominated by Democrats, the committed conservative core has considerable organizing muscle because of its ability to raise money and manpower for GOP causes.

But Garry South, a veteran Democratic strategist, says the GOP conservative wing and groups such as the Club for Growth have made it only more difficult for Republicans to make inroads in California.

For example, he said, polls repeatedly show that "voters are not opposed to new taxes" if the money will improve schools in California, and generally they don't oppose tax increases to the wealthiest Californians.

"The Club for Growth has as its goal keeping moderate Republicans from winning primaries, to sweep the horizon and try to reduce it to the true-blue, orthodox right," he said. "They're not going on a crusade against Arnold, but against everyone else? Yes."

Many attendees at the meeting noted that conservatives differ with Schwarzenegger on issues such as gay rights and the environment but continue to strongly back his efforts to balance the budget without raising taxes -- and were fired up when he took a high-profile stance against illegal immigration, recently endorsing the work of the Minutemen, a citizens group that patrolled the border.

The new California Club for Growth has endorsed Schwarzenegger's call for reform and now plans to promote initiatives directly to the state's voters, says former Assemblyman Tony Strickland, president of the organization.

"Arnold Schwarzenegger is a good salesman for our message," Strickland told the group at Saturday's meeting. "With Arnold Schwarzenegger's success, we will be able to make sure we will win California in 2008 and send (New York Democratic Sen.) Hillary Clinton packing."

But there were warnings that, after months of talking, the governor could pay dearly if he

fails to deliver on his agenda.

"The governor has drawn a line in the sand against the most powerful (special interests) which have wrapped its tentacles" around the state budget, said state Sen. Tom McClintock, a popular figure among conservatives. "And it's important to see that fight through."

Steve Frank, whose Political News and Views newsletter reaches 200,000 subscribers around the state, agreed, saying that "on a state level, if the GOP throws its hands in the air and says, 'We give up,' and the governor doesn't stand for reform in the face of a Democratic onslaught, then how can we?"

Fox told Republicans to applause that "the reason we had the (2003) recall was to fix the budget problems," and many Republicans now believe that if Schwarzenegger waits until 2006 to bring budget reform before the voters, "he doesn't affect the budget" until at least two years later -- too late for many.

"For that reason alone, we will have the special election," Fox said.

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