

Sanders seeks re-election

Congressman won't challenge Jeffords in 2000

By Adam Lisberg
Free Press Staff Writer

Congressman Bernie Sanders made it official Monday, announcing he will seek a sixth term in the U.S. House next year and end his flirtation with running for the U.S. Senate. His statement helped shape the plans of several Vermont politicians who had been waiting for Sanders to make up his mind.

■ Sanders' deal with Dems, 5A

Sanders, an independent, said he had seriously considered running for the Senate because it offered more power, more influence and a longer term. But he decided to seek re-election to the House, he said, after talking with his colleagues and constituents — and after House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Mo., promised him a powerful committee post if Democrats win a House majority in the 2000 election.

"Many, many months ago, I was giving very serious thought toward running for the Senate," Sanders told reporters in his Burlington office Monday morning. "My work in the House is not yet



ADAM PIKE RIESNER, Free Press

Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., declares Monday in Burlington he will run for re-election to the House next year rather than challenge incumbent Sen. James Jeffords, R-Vt. "My work in the House is not yet completed," Sanders said.

Candidate reactions



**Sen.
James
Jeffords
R-Vt.**

"I believe Congressman Sanders made the decision that is right for Vermont."



**State Sen.
Jan Backus
D-Chittenden**

"It doesn't change my plans at all. It does make life a little simpler for me."



**State
Auditor
Edward
Flanagan**

"I'm anxious to wage a campaign against Senator Jeffords."

Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., announced Monday he would not run for the U.S. Senate. Reactions from three others seeking that seat:

completed. I see many, many challenges ahead."

Sanders' decision means incumbent Sen. James Jeffords, R-Vt., will have an easier shot at winning reelection next year, according to Democratic and Republican observers. He will be up against two Democratic challengers: state Auditor Edward Flanagan and state Sen. Jan Backus, D-Chittenden, who lost to Jeffords in 1994.

It also means that at least two politicians who had considered running for Sanders' House seat will drop those plans.

"It means I know who's running for what now," said

SANDERS: Elects to seek re-election to House

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Mark Michaud, executive director of the Vermont Democratic Party. "If Bernie went into that Senate race, it would have shaped up quite differently."

Jeffords, who is recovering from back surgery last week, was not available for comment. His office released a one-sentence statement: "I believe Congressman Sanders made the decision that is right for Vermont."

Different race

Jeffords' two challengers will face off in a September primary election. Backus had only \$11,018 in her campaign fund at the end of June, when such funds were last reported, compared with \$187,046 in Flanagan's account. Jeffords led the money race with \$650,676 on hand.

Backus and Flanagan are left-of-center Democrats who plan to portray Jeffords as someone who isn't working to bring down prescription drug prices, make health care more affordable, or help more Vermonters see the rewards of a strong economy.

Both steered clear of criticizing each other directly Monday, even as they tried to lay the groundwork for a campaign.

"Senator Jeffords is a very nice guy. Jan Backus is a really nice

person. But that's not really the point," Flanagan said. "They are taking an insider's approach, and I am taking an outsider's approach."

Said Backus: "I don't have any quarrel with Ed. I don't know much about him. He's untested."

Sanders, meanwhile, has no announced opponents for his House seat, which he has held since 1991. He reported having \$315,094 in the bank by mid-year.

Flanagan had considered running for the House but will stick with his Senate bid; state Treasurer James Douglas, a Republican, had mulled a run for the House but said Monday he will likely seek re-election as treasurer instead.

"Congressman Sanders has a House seat for life, and that's a hard thing to give up," said Jim Jordan, political director for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, which tried to woo Sanders into challenging Jeffords. "He was, though, facing a situation where voters seemed content to have him stay put in the House."

Tough decision

Sanders said he heard that message all year long from voters, including long-time allies, who wanted him to stay in the

House and use his seniority to full effect.

"The best that we can say is that if I had run, it would have been a very close race," Sanders said. "Who would have won, I don't know."

Two polls showed a Jeffords-Sanders race would be a statistical tie. Jeffords had prepared for a possible Sanders run by launching an early fund-raising drive, telling donors he hoped to raise as much as \$2.4 million — \$500,000 more than has ever been raised in a Vermont election.

A Senate seat offered plenty of allure for Sanders. Senators serve six-year terms instead of two-year terms in the House, and have more leeway than House members in influencing legislation. However, it would have meant risking the 10 years' seniority Sanders will have built up in the House, as well as the left-right coalitions he has built on pet issues like international trade, health care and dairy policy.

"For many of my strong supporters," Sanders said, "there was a feeling that if I lost that voice, part of that movement would not be represented in Washington."

What tipped the scales for Sanders was the offer of a seat on

the powerful House Appropriations Committee if Democrats seize control of the House next year. Gephardt made the offer to Sanders in a Nov. 18 letter.

"Like a funnel, virtually everything in Congress has got to go through the Appropriations Committee," Sanders said. "As a member of the Appropriations Committee I will not only be able to play a stronger role in defending the interests of Vermont, but I will be in a better position to shape national priorities."

Sanders said he will continue to run as an independent, not as a Democrat. He took heat at his news conference from environmental activist Michael Colby, who accused Sanders of cutting deals with the Democrats he had once reviled. Sanders refused to discuss the issue with Colby.

"He's scared of his progressive roots, and he's scared of real questions," Colby said afterward. "He's become nothing more than a Democrat."

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