

CHAPTER 14

JUST PRIOR TO THE STATE ASSEMBLY

As the deadline (June 3, 1994) for Bruce Benson to turn in his petition signatures to get on the Republican primary ballot neared, a member of the Bird for Governor campaign staff telephoned the Colorado secretary of state's office in Denver to find out exactly how many signatures Benson needed to get in each of Colorado's six congressional districts in order to qualify for the Republican primary ballot. The statistics provided by one of the state election clerks confirmed what some of the Bird campaign staff thought was the case. Benson needed to get substantially more signatures in the fifth congressional district (Colorado Springs and a large part of eastern Colorado) than in any other congressional district.

The reason for this was obvious. The fifth congressional district was exactly the place (Colorado Springs and environs) where Mike Bird was the strongest and Bruce Benson would be expected to have the most difficulty getting signatures. As the Bird campaign staff turned its attention to this problem, rumors began circulating in Colorado Springs that Benson was having trouble getting enough petition signatures in district five.

There was a further problem. Because many of the signatures would be disallowed by the secretary of state's office (not a registered voter, not a registered Republican, name spelled wrong, etc.), the secretary of state was recommending that Benson get the required number of signatures *plus 30 percent* in order to be sure of having enough signatures to qualify. That raised the number of signatures needed in the fifth congressional district to 2,584, almost 1,000 more than the number needed in any one of the other five congressional districts. The exact figures were:

<u>Congressional District</u>	<u>Signatures Required</u>	<u>Signatures Required + 30%</u>
1	659	857
2	1,042	1,355
3	1,233	1,603
4	1,102	1,433
5	1,988	2,584
6	1,146	1,490

The Mike Bird for Governor campaign staff showed this data to Mike Bird, who noted that 2,584 signatures should not be too much trouble for Bruce Benson to gather, even in the congressional district where Bird had his strongest support.

It was suggested to Mike Bird that this data should be shared with Peter Blake of the *Rocky Mountain News* or some other newspaper reporter who covered Colorado politics in depth. The data would be presented with total honesty: "Word had reached the Bird campaign that Bruce Benson was having trouble getting the signatures he needed in the fifth congressional district."

Mike Bird thought this was a good idea. It fit in with Bird's current mood that his campaign needed to do somewhat sensational and courageous things in order to overcome the media's current fascination with Bruce Benson. As usual, however, he told his staff to check the idea out with Jim Scherer, the campaign manager in Denver.

Scherer was more skeptical than Bird about suggesting that Benson was having trouble getting petition signatures in the fifth congressional district. He worried that such an announcement might have the effect of encouraging people to go out and sign a petition just to make sure Benson got on the ballot.

About this time a Bird for Governor staff member dropped an advertisement off at the *Colorado Statesman*, the weekly newspaper that focuses on Colorado politics. The staff member made it a point to tell

the editor, Jody Hope Strogoff, about the rumors and suspicions that Benson might be having trouble getting enough signatures in district five. Jody listened intently and even made a copy of the figures. "We'll be talking to the Benson people later today," she said. "We'll see if they will comment at all on whether or not they are having a problem."

Responding to this anonymous leak from the Bird campaign staff, the *Colorado Statesman* ran a brief item about the speculation that Benson might be having trouble getting the necessary signatures in the fifth district. The article raised the possibility of such a debacle for Benson, but it then quoted the Benson forces as saying they had all the signatures they needed to qualify for the Republican primary ballot.¹

The Bird campaign staff began thinking about what might happen if, as a number of signs indicated, Benson was having trouble getting enough signatures in the fifth congressional district. If it really was tight getting the number of required signatures plus 30 percent, that would put powerful pressure on Benson to, at the last minute, put his name in nomination at the Republican State Assembly.

Why would he do that? The deadline for turning in the petition signatures was June 3, 1994. The state assembly was June 4, 1994. The Colorado secretary of state would need a number of weeks to certify that Benson had enough signatures, and that process would last well past June 4, 1994. If Benson did not have enough signatures in the fifth congressional district, he would not get on the Republican primary ballot, and the state assembly would be long in the past. At that moment the Benson campaign would be over. In such a situation (the possibility of not having enough signatures), Bruce Benson might be better off to put his name in at the Republican State Assembly at the last minute and take his chances there.

The Bird for Governor campaign staff would have given anything at this moment to be a fly on the wall at Benson headquarters. If the signature situation in the fifth congressional district really was tight, the arguments about which strategy to follow - stick with petitioning on the ballot or go to the state assembly - would really have been something to

hear.

In the end the Bird campaign decided not to officially tell the Colorado press that Bruce Benson possibly was having petition signature problems. Mike Bird stuck with his basic position that Bruce Benson should be settling things at the Republican State Assembly and not bothering with the petition process at all. In addition, Bird thought suggesting that Benson was having petition problems might backfire and generate sympathy for Benson. Most of all, the effort would be futile. It was very likely that Bruce Benson had all the signatures he needed and then some.

The rumors that Benson was having trouble getting petition signatures did shake up state Republican headquarters in Denver. Mike Hesse, the executive director of the Colorado Republican Party, telephoned Mike Bird about 10 o'clock one evening and asked that Bird *not* contest the Benson petition signatures. Hesse's rationale was that such a move would be extremely divisive to the Republican Party and hurt the eventual party nominee in the general election against Roy Romer.

Mike Bird noted that Mike Hesse's telephone call was the one instance during the battle for the Republican nomination for governor that the state Republican Party called Bird and made a specific request. Bird assured Mike Hesse that the Bird campaign had no intention of officially protesting Benson's petition signatures.²

LAST MINUTE INTENSITY

Although it was now late May, the notoriously bad spring weather in Colorado became a factor in the Bird for Governor campaign. Originally Bird had been scheduled on May 26, 1994, to fly in a private airplane to Grand Junction to meet with area delegates to the Republican State Assembly and do a debate with Dick Sargent on a Grand Junction radio station. A typical late-spring Colorado snowstorm in the Rocky Mountains, however, caused all light aircraft to be warned away from

flying over the mountains due to icing on the wings. Bird had to take a commercial flight to Grand Junction, which was considerably more expensive than flying in a donated private plane.

It had to be done. It was now one week until the Republican State Assembly. Mike Bird, and Dick Sargent as well, had to make every public appearance and go on every radio and television show possible.

Notes To Chapter 14:

1. "In Your Dreams," Colorado Statesman, 27 May 1994, 5.
2. Interestingly, Republican State Headquarters did not call Dick Sargent and ask him not to protest Bruce Benson's ballot signatures. Author's notes, interview with Dick Sargent, Denver, 21 November 1994.