

Baker and Polito to Exit Together After Eight Years in Corner Office

By Matt Murphy

State House News Service

Gov. Charlie Baker, a two-term Republican who at his peak was one of the most popular governors in the country, said Wednesday he will not seek a third term, throwing wide open the 2022 race for the state's top political office after close to two years of managing through a global pandemic.

Baker, who in deciding against another campaign forgoes a chance to make history as the first governor to serve three consecutive four-year terms, said he felt another run would become a "distraction" from the work of helping Massachusetts rebound from the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic and took aim at what he described as the "public sniping and grandstanding" that proliferate in modern politics.

The 65-year-old governor also cited his desire to be there for the "moments, big and small" for his family after what will be eight years of the daily grind of running a state with 7 million people. Baker and First Lady Lauren Baker have three adult children.

"As we come out of this pandemic to rebuild, recreate, reimagine many of the things that were busted during the course of all this, we believe it's most important that we spend the next year focusing on that and not focusing on, let's call it the discourse – and that's probably an insult to the word discourse – that comes with political campaigns," Baker said during a State House press conference.

In a surprise, Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito, who was widely

considered to be the heir to the Baker political legacy, also decided against a run for governor in 2022, dramatically reshaping the contest on the Republican side. The exit of Baker and Polito from the picture, according to Democratic Party figures, could make the decision easier for Attorney General Maura Healey to enter the race on the Democratic side, which already features three candidates.

Polito nodded to family considerations as a factor in her decision, noting the times at night and on weekends that she has missed with her two children, who are now both in high school, and her desire to spend more time with her husband.

"My whole idea of running with the governor was to come into office with the governor, to serve as a team with the governor, and to finish with the governor," Polito said.

Baker spent much of the day Wednesday calling friends and allies to let them know of his decision, and informed his Cabinet during a meeting Wednesday morning. The governor and lieutenant governor then released a joint statement, citing the need to focus on building an economic recovery as Massachusetts emerges from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The governor said the decision was "very complicated and difficult," but he ultimately decided that a campaign would be a "big step away from what we should be focused on, which is continuing, like the lieutenant governor said, to make sure our kids can stay in school, to make sure our economy gets better and to deal with all the very significant issues our communities are going to face going forward."

In the wake of Baker's announcement, political insiders were discussing all kinds of possibilities for what the 2022 race could look like, including the possibility that former Boston mayor and U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh might enter the contest.

Healey, the popular Democratic prosecutor, has previously said

she hoped to make a decision this fall, but deflected questions Wednesday about her political future and, instead, thanked Baker for his service.

“He has been a valued partner to my office and to me. I have deep regard and respect for the way he has led, with a commitment to doing what is right on behalf of the people of the Commonwealth. I also appreciate that, in this time of divisiveness and challenge, he has always been willing to listen and make his own calls with a focus on respect and finding common ground,” Healey said.

Baker said he spoke to Walsh on Wednesday, but the two friends shared “humorous anecdotes” and did not discuss Walsh’s thoughts on the race. Sources close to Walsh said they expect the Dorchester Democrat to consider his options, but suggested it could be less attractive if Healey decides to run. The Dorchester Reporter also reported that Boston City Councilor Annissa Essaibi George, just weeks off the mayoral campaign trail, is weighing a run, and a source close to Norfolk County Treasurer Michael Bellotti said the former sheriff was thinking about his chances in a race for governor.

Republican Geoff Diehl, a former state lawmaker, has already entered the race for his party’s nomination with the endorsement of former President Donald Trump, and three Democrats – Harvard professor Danielle Allen, former state Sen. Ben Downing and Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz – are also running. While there are no Republican candidates for lieutenant governor at the moment, Sen. Adam Hinds, Rep. Tami Gouveia and businessman Bret Bero are all running as Democrats.

Walsh’s chief of staff and a 2018 Congressional candidate Dan Koh is also seriously considering a run for lieutenant governor, according to someone familiar with his planning. Sources close to Joseph Kennedy III denied that the former Democratic congressman might be interested in running for governor, or attorney general if Healey leaves.

Diehl said that despite his differences with Baker, notably on his handling of COVID-19 restrictions, he “always liked Charlie Baker and Karyn Polito personally and I wish them the best in their future endeavors.”

“I have a message to Massachusetts residents who are tired of the status quo: I will work hard every day to make our state a better place to live, work, and raise a family. I believe that starts by placing more emphasis on individual freedom and initiative. I will fight for people who need help. I’ll support struggling working families. I will oppose new taxes. I will support parents who don’t want government taking away their freedom to make choices about their child’s health care and curriculum,” Diehl said in a statement.

Baker did not directly answer a question about whether he would support Diehl or encourage other Republicans to look at the race, saying his focus over the next year will be “on the work.”

On the Republican side, Housing and Economic Development Secretary Mike Kennealy’s name spread through some political circles as someone who could seek the GOP nomination. Kennealy’s office did not respond to a request for comment.

Recent polling had suggested that Baker could fair well in hypothetical matchups against the Democrats running or thinking about running, but he would have also faced a potentially bruising Republican primary as his relationship with the base of his party and the leadership of the MassGOP has frayed in the Trump era.

That strained connection to the MassGOP was evident in the statement issued by MassGOP Chair Jim Lyons, who said he looked forward to working with former President Trump to rebuild the Republican Party in Massachusetts.

“We’re turning a new page here in Massachusetts,” Lyons said. “Our party remains committed to the America-First agenda

advocated by President Donald J. Trump, and it's clear to me that Charlie Baker was shaken by President Trump's endorsement of another Republican candidate in Geoff Diehl."

Baker did not support Trump during either the former president's runs for the White House, and his approval ratings are stronger among Democrats and independents than with Republican voters. Though it had been suggested that Baker could run as an independent in 2022, the governor brushed that notion aside, professing a belief in his brand of pragmatic Republicanism molded under his political mentors former Govs. Bill Weld and Paul Cellucci.

Asked about Lyons's comments, Baker quipped, "No, not shaken." Baker also said the "bipartisan noise" of today's politics did not factor into his decision, and he attributed his administration's enduring popularity to the ability of him and Polito to stand apart from that.

A graduate of Harvard University and Northwestern University's business school, Baker served in the Cabinets of both Weld and Cellucci as secretary of the health and human services and administration and finance before returning to the private sector to run Harvard Pilgrim Health Care as CEO.

He first ran for governor in 2010, losing to incumbent Democrat Gov. Deval Patrick. But he returned four years later with a more positive message and defeated Democratic nominee Martha Coakley, then the attorney general. He would cruise to reelection four years later against Democrat Jay Gonzalez.

From the first days of Baker's governorship, his administration has had to deal with unexpected crises, starting with a historic winter that dumped mountains of snow on Massachusetts in early 2015 and brought the MBTA to a standstill. More recently, the governor has had to guide the state through the evolving stages of a global health crisis, from the early shutdown of businesses to the rollout of

vaccines and a contentious return to in-person schooling.

Forging relationships with leaders of the heavily Democratic House and Senate, Baker has signed major criminal justice and policing reform laws, and helped to bring Massachusetts to the brink of launching an offshore wind industry with the promise of jobs and clean energy. He also cited the work his administration has done to spur housing production, put the state on solid financial footing by building up reserves, and working to increase treatment and recovery options for people struggling with addiction.

The governor, however, has also had to weather scandals. Notably, it came to light in 2019 that the Registry of Motor Vehicle had failed to track many out-of-state violations, including drunk driving, by Massachusetts drivers, allowing a truck driver responsible for a deadly crash in New Hampshire to keep his license. Baker's management of the Holyoke Soldiers Home has also come under scrutiny after a COVID-19 outbreak claimed the lives of 76 veterans early in the pandemic.

Baker's critics cast him as a politician without vision, while his allies saw someone able to work across the aisle to get results, and who forged close ties with municipal leaders around the state and was responsive to the needs of cities and towns.

"After 7 years as Governor, Charlie Baker has had more wins than losses. But the debacle of the MBTA, the Registry and other disasters that happened on his watch would have taken a backseat to what he did to dig out the Commonwealth in the 2015 winter and then making the tough decisions on dealing with the COVID crisis," said Democratic consultant Ernie Corrigan, who served with Baker in the Weld administration.

Corrigan said he was surprised by Polito's decision to sit out 2022, but called the idea put forward by Lyons and Democratic

Party Chairman Gus Bickford that Trump and Diehl drove the governor out of the race “ludicrous.”

Bickford blamed the rightward shift of the Republican Party for Baker’s decision, despite the Democrat’s political differences with the governor.

“The takeover of the MassGOP by the Donald Trump wing of the Republican Party is complete. Charlie Baker was pushed out of office by his own Party which has completely adopted the tactics and policies of Donald Trump. The MassGOP’s hand-picked candidate for Governor, Geoff Diehl, is a Trump loyalist whose extreme politics match the hate and divisiveness peddled by the national Republican Party,” Bickford said.

Chang-Diaz responded to the news of Baker and Polito’s decision by saying that Massachusetts is ready for a “new chapter with new leadership.”

“For far too long, people in power have asked working families to wait for change – despite a growing affordable housing crisis, inaccessible and expensive child and health care, the existential threat of climate change, and long-standing racial injustice. In 2022, our next Governor must be someone willing to take on challenges even when they’re hard – who recognizes the urgency of this moment, who tackles these issues with the courage to solve them, and who has a record of winning bold, systemic change on Beacon Hill,” Chang-Diaz said.

Downing said his decision to run for governor had to do with what he sees as a lack of “urgency” on Beacon Hill, not to try to deny Baker or Polito another four years.

“Governor Baker’s decision to not run for re-election marks an opportunity to both upend the culture of complacency on Beacon Hill and elect leadership committed to delivering much-needed change to all 351 communities in Massachusetts,” Downing said.

And Allen gave Baker “kudos” for his “seriousness of purpose throughout.”

“The time is here to secure a green and healthy next-gen democracy,” Allen said.

Some Democrats on Beacon Hill praised the governor for his style of governing over the past seven years. Senate President Karen Spilka and House Speaker Ron Mariano each issued statements commending Baker’s ability to work constructively across the aisle, even though they didn’t always agree.

And Rep. Chris Markey called Baker the “best governor in the US.”

“We need more leaders who listen like him, act like him and lead like him. I hope who ever runs for Governor looks to him on how to lead with class and grace. He will be missed!,” the Dartmouth Democrat wrote on Twitter.

But others in the Legislature saw Baker’s exit from the field as bolstering an opportunity to put just the second Democrat in the corner office in over 30 years. Before Patrick, Michael Dukakis was the last Democrat elected governor in 1986, his third, non-consecutive term.

“This is a big opportunity for Massachusetts to take a giant leap forward in making a difference in people’s lives, by electing a progressive Democrat to the Corner Office,” said Sen. Jamie Eldridge, who has endorsed Chang-Diaz in next year’s primary.

While Baker’s fundraising has lagged over the course of the pandemic, the Republican Governors Association has invested heavily in his past two campaigns and figured to be there again to support the governor had he decided to seek a third term.

In a statement, RGA Co-Chair Doug Ducey, the governor of

Arizona, praised Baker for his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and helping lead the way with a blueprint for states to recover economically.

“His success is proof Republicans are able to win and govern successfully in any state, no matter how blue it might be,” Ducey said. “Had he chosen to seek a third term I have no doubt he would have easily been re-elected because the voters recognize what a strong leader he has been for their state. We wish him and his family the best in whatever life brings him next.”