

Washington

Q&A: Ryan Still Weighing Speaker Post

BY ALAN FRAM
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Rep. Paul Ryan says he doesn't want to be the next House speaker but he's thinking it through — even as the Republican establishment pressures him to just do it.

For that to happen, the Wisconsin Republican would have to conclude that the House Freedom Caucus wouldn't make his life — and a possible future presidential run — miserable if he said "yes." That cantankerous collection of conservatives helped usher current Speaker John Boehner out the door and shatter Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy's quest for the soon-to-be-vacant post.

Here's where things stand:
Q: What's Ryan's latest position?

A: Geographically, it's his hometown of Janesville, Wis., where he's spending Congress' Columbus Day recess week with his wife and three young children.

Publicly, he's still a no. "Nothing has changed on his position. He's spending the week with his family and I don't expect any news on it at all this week," said Brendan Buck, spokesman for Ryan.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus and 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney have tried talking Ryan into



Ryan

it, Republicans say. But there's no obvious alternative or predictable end to the tumult that's rocked the House since Sept. 25, when Boehner, R-Ohio, unexpectedly announced he'll resign later

this month.

Q: Why Ryan?

A: Nobody's heard of most of the House's 435 members, but Ryan stands out. He was the GOP's 2012 vice presidential candidate, chaired the House Budget Committee and currently heads its tax-writing Ways and Means Committee. Republicans consider him an articulate spokesman for the party's efforts to cut taxes, remake benefit programs like Medicare and erase President Barack Obama's health care overhaul.

His youthful appearance — he's only 45 — gives Republicans a face they'd love to present to voters. And he's been in the chamber since 1999, letting him nurture good relationships with hard-right conservatives and pragmatic Republicans alike.

He could probably also raise lots of campaign cash for House GOP candidates. That's a big part of the speaker's job and one at which Boehner has excelled.

Q: Do conservatives want Ryan to take the job?

A: He's not necessarily persuaded the grass roots. Jenny Beth Martin, national coordinator of the Tea Party Patriots, which claims hundreds of chapters around the country, said Ryan represents "business as usual."

But prominent members of the House Freedom Caucus flashed a green light over the weekend. That included the group's chairman, Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, who called Ryan "a great communicator" and said the organization "would look favorably on him."

That's important because one Republican close to Ryan says he'd only consider seeking the post if he doesn't have to make promises to win the votes of GOP lawmakers when the full House picks the next speaker, perhaps late this month. The person spoke on condition of anonymity to describe private conversations with Ryan.

Boehner and McCarthy, R-Calif., were undermined because it takes 218 votes to become speaker. With the Freedom Caucus claiming membership from around 40 of the House's 247 Republicans, their animosity — and they have plenty of it toward Boehner and McCarthy — was enough to sink both men.

Q: What is the Freedom Caucus?

A: It's a group of conservative House Republicans who favor far more combative tactics against President Barack Obama than the leadership prefers. They claim

around 40 members, but refuse to make their membership list public.

One unofficial tally shows that nearly two-thirds of them were elected in the past three elections, starting with the 2010 tea party wave that gave Republicans House control. About that same proportion are from the South and Southwest.

In addition, almost all come from comfortably Republican congressional districts, so their main hurdle to retaining their seats is potential challenges in the GOP primary election. That generally means it pays for them to be as conservative as possible.

Q: What do they want?

A: The Freedom Caucus' views on issues are often the same as the GOP leadership's. For example, they want to cut federal spending, annul Obama's health care overhaul and halt Planned Parenthood's government money.

They differ over how best to fight. Caucus members want the GOP to push its priorities by daring Obama to veto bills financing federal agencies and renewing the government's borrowing authority. Top Republicans say such confrontations could result in a federal shutdown and a default — which leaders fear voters would blame on the GOP in next year's elections.

Freedom Caucus members want to change House GOP rules to weaken the speaker's ability to control who will chair committees and

on which bills and amendments the House votes. They also want GOP leaders to stop punishing them for rebellious votes. Some conservatives have been removed from committees or seen GOP-controlled political committees run advertising against them.

Conservatives say these changes would give rank-and-file lawmakers more power. Other Republicans say those procedures and punishments help enforce party discipline and keep the GOP better united against Democrats.

Q: Can the Freedom Caucus force its view on Ryan?

A: So far they've been supporting Rep. Daniel Webster, R-Fla., to be speaker. It's unclear whether all caucus members would abandon Webster if Ryan wants the job.

Two conservatives have quit the caucus recently including Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., who complained that its confrontational tactics were hurting Republicans. And some caucus members like Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, say any speaker candidates must explain to the group how they will improve how the GOP pushes its agenda through Congress.

Lawmakers preparing to seek the job if Ryan turns it down include Rep. Bill Flores, R-Texas, who leads the House Republican Study Committee, which also represents conservatives.

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