

Exclusive: Benson Tells IMP She's Focused On Wayne State, Her Husband's Military Service

Democrat **Jocelyn Benson** tells **Inside Michigan Politics** today that she made the final decision not to run for the 11th Congressional District next year while overseas visiting her husband, U.S. Army Sgt. **Ryan Friedrichs**, for the Thanksgiving holiday.

Benson, the 2010 Secretary of State nominee, said that her focus is on serving as interim dean of the Wayne State University Law School and supporting her husband, who is on active duty until September 2014. She sent a letter Tuesday to her WSU colleagues informing them that she would be staying on.

"I realized my work there wasn't done," Benson told **IMP** in a phone interview this afternoon. "To give my all to a political campaign would be unfair to those two priorities."

The recent shooting death of a Wayne State law student also had "a significant impact" on her decision. Benson said today that the "death of one of our brightest students" made her feel "that I didn't want to leave our community quite yet."

Democratic insiders had told **IMP** that the Democratic National Campaign Committee (DCCC) did make calls to congressional offices last month saying Benson was running. Sources told **IMP** that Benson was viewed as a very strong contender by the DCCC and EMILY's List, which endorses female candidates supporting abortion rights, and their enthusiasm for a run looks to have exceeded hers.

Asked if the DCCC and other leaders were disappointed in her decision not to run, Benson said she would "leave that to other folks. I couldn't think about that. I had to think of where I would make the greatest impact and do the most good."

Republicans have already been trying out the line that Benson will run for anything, as her name also was circulating for attorney general in 2014. Some Democrats are concerned about her future after turning down a run for a key congressional seat. But Benson said she's not one of them, noting there are "many other sectors where you can have an impact."

The MI-11 is represented by U.S. Rep. **Kerry Bentivolio** (R-Milford), a reindeer rancher who was the last Republican standing after now now-former U.S. Rep. **Thad McCotter** resigned last year amid a petition-signing scandal. Bentivolio is facing a strong GOP primary challenge from attorney **David Trott**, a longtime Republican fundraiser with establishment support.

Benson, who serves as president of the Military Spouses of Michigan, said that she traveled in October to Washington, D.C., to advocate for families during the shutdown. She said military families were already feeling the pain of sequestration cuts.

During that visit, she met with two longtime friends, U.S. Reps. **Dan Kildee** (D-Flint) and **Tulsi Gabbard** (D-Hawaii) about military family issues. During that discussion, Benson said, the two members of Congress urged her to join them – something leaders had approached her about in 2012, as well.

“Going into those meetings, I did not expect to be talking about running for Congress,” Benson said. “It kind of snowballed.”

Benson also was wooed in D.C. by U.S. House Minority Leader **Nancy Pelosi** (D-Calif.) and other big players.

Benson said she considered running for Congress because military families “deserve good representation.” Friedrichs, a former nonprofit executive, enlisted three years ago and serves with the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

“He felt that with the 10-year war in Afghanistan and eventually Iraq, having only 1% of the population on active duty meant too many people were bearing the burden,” Benson said. “He enlisted so that someone wouldn’t have to go back a second or third time.”

Ultimately, Benson said that she believes can do more outside of Congress, working with both Republicans and Democrats. She said that WSU Law School will be starting a clinic with Macomb County offering free legal services for veterans, servicemembers and their families.

Benson, who wrote a book on how to be an effective Secretary of State, said that’s why she made the leap to run for that office three years ago. Ultimately, she said that’s where she believes she would make the biggest impact in terms of public service. However, Benson declined to answer if she would still consider running for SOS in 2014, reiterating that Wayne State and her husband “are taking up all of my time.”

With her fundraising ability and statewide campaign experience, Benson was considered a top-tier prospect for the Democrats for the Republican-leaning seat in western Wayne and Oakland counties.

Benson’s decision not to run could avoid a serious primary on the Democratic side. That’s good news for counterterrorism expert **Bobby McKenzie**, who left his position with the U.S. State Department to announce his candidacy in October.

Benson told IMP that she hasn’t “given any thought” to endorsing McKenzie. “I don’t know Mr. McKenzie ... nor have I been approached,” she said.

McKenzie had been weighing a bid for months, and was encouraged by many Democratic leaders, like Michigan Democratic Party Chair **Lon Johnson**.

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