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Frazier's star rises in GOP

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By Peter Jones

SPECIAL TO THE COLORADO STATESMAN

Few suburban officeholders in the metro area have received the kind of attention Ryan Frazier attracts. That may be because the 31-year-old, two-term, at-large Aurora City Council member has proven to be not your typical city official.



City Councilman Ryan Frazier has been mentioned as a potential candidate for

Congress in Senate in 2010.

Photo by Peter Jones
 The Colorado Statesman

When Frazier spoke Feb. 4 at the weekly breakfast of the Arapahoe County Republican Men's Club at the Cool River Café in Greenwood Village, he addressed far broader themes than the typical nonpartisan City Council land-use and zoning concerns.

"As Republicans who dare to actually be Republicans," he said, "we must work for the people to create a responsible government that keeps taxes low, that fills holes in water systems, that protects their rights, that upholds the Constitution, that defends our country, that allows parents choice in their child's education."

Frazier's rising star in Arapahoe County political circles belies his relative youth. In 2003, at age 26, he became the first Aurora City Council candidate to advertise on television. The ambitious, untried strategy paid off — Frazier defeated his closest rival by nearly 3,000 votes.

Four years later, Republican activists came out in force to raise \$85,000 in campaign funds for Frazier's re-election to the nonpartisan office.

The largest war chest for a council candidate in Aurora's history was generated despite Frazier's relatively moderate views on some social issues.

Last year, the up-and-coming Republican and small-business owner made news again when he co-authored the hotly debated "right to work" ballot measure. Had it succeeded, Amendment 47 would have amended the state Constitution to say union membership and the payment of dues or fees could not be mandated as a condition of employment.

Despite or because of Frazier's close association with that controversial measure, the young politician has become an object of hope among Republican activists. Last year, his name was floated as a possible candidate for every office from Aurora mayor to Colorado governor.

In the wake of November's Democratic sweep at the ballot box, Frazier has been mentioned as a potential challenger to recent Democratic U.S. Senate appointee Michael Bennet or to U.S. Rep. Ed Perlmutter in the competitive 7th Congressional District.

Over the span of less than six years, Frazier has gone from being an unknown City Council candidate to being a relatively high-profile partisan with high aspirations for the GOP.

In his speech to the Men's Club, he focused largely on Republican rejuvenation in the face of defeat.

"In recent years, it is safe to say we have strayed from our course," Frazier told more than 100 party activists and elected officials. "I think it is our responsibility to return back to a true course, to run our ship, to get back on track. ... It's going to take a new generation of leadership to join our elder statesmen and stateswomen to lead our party forward."

According to Frazier, recent Republican losses can be explained by the party's tenuous hold on its principles and its failure to reach voters consistently in meaningful ways.

"Ultimately, we have to connect with people on things that matter — on pocketbook issues, safe communities, a government that works, taking care of our children and our seniors and American innovation," he said. "When we connect, we win."

After two disappointing election cycles, many Arapahoe County Republicans believe Frazier, a

young, handsome and socially moderate black politician, may be just the kind of candidate the party now needs to help invigorate the base while attracting swing voters at all levels.

Frazier's emerging role in the Republican Party is not without national context. The recent ascendency of 47-year-old Barack Obama and the election of Michael Steele, 50, the first African-American to chair the Republican National Committee, both occurred as the GOP was striving openly to attract more blacks and more young voters.

Nathan Chambers, chairman of the Arapahoe County Republican Party, sees Frazier as one of the new more promising players on the local political stage as the party prepares for 2010.

"First of all, Ryan's youth is an attribute," Chambers said. "I think Republicans and Democrats also are always looking for young talent. I think voters are particularly receptive to new faces right now. I do think his being black is helpful."

Frazier has made a few waves while braving the political waters of name recognition. The city councilman incurred the wrath of union leaders, including some Aurora firefighters, when he became a lead advocate for Amendment 47.

During the intense battle over the measure last year, Frazier's ethics were the subject of a television commercial that questioned a campaign contribution he received from a firm that had been awarded an Aurora city contract. Frazier was later cleared of any wrongdoing by a joint investigation of the Arapahoe and Adams county district attorneys' offices.

Some have suggested the divisive, union-restricting measure provided slippery footing for a young politician on the rise. But, according to Chambers, Frazier's willingness to take a potentially bridge-burning position is a large part of what makes him refreshing.

"Certainly, it was a political risk. He's principled," the Republican chair said.

Frazier may be taking much the same risk on social issues, which, in Arapahoe County, have often made or broken Republican primary candidates. Frazier was politely quizzed at the Men's Club about his support for a proposal to grant domestic-partnership benefits to same-sex Aurora city employees.

"I believe marriage is between a man and a woman. Let me be very clear about that," he said. "But when it comes to two people, consenting adults, who happen to share a household and happen to be in a loving relationship — whether you or I agree with that is beside the point — it's their life. ... We believe in liberty. ... [Republicans] see the role of government as to protect our freedoms."

Frazier has effectively crossed partisan lines in support of such positions. In 2006, he joined Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, a Democrat, in publicly endorsing Referendum I, a failed statewide measure that would have granted domestic-partnership rights to same-sex couples.

Chambers doesn't think Frazier's more liberal social stances or bipartisan efforts will stand in the way of his political aspirations as the party works to regain its position in a once-Republican county that now has more registered Democrats.

"Certainly, there will be some people in the Republican Party who will be troubled," he said. "But I am of the view that the Republican tent is big enough to include people who have differences of opinion on these sensitive subjects. Ryan has developed a reputation as someone who is able to work with both sides of the aisle."

When Frazier, a married father of three, was asked about his proudest accomplishments, the speaker was quick to mention the Academy at High Point, an Aurora charter school he helped found three years ago. When asked specifically about public policy, the councilman stressed his style and approach over specific initiatives.

"I pride myself on being the voice of the people, more than anything else, more than ordinances I supported or a policy I advocated for," he said. "What has been most important is being a reasonable, common-sense voice on the City Council."