

JOAN VENNOCHI
**Romney
 exit talk
 runs high**

THE ROOFTOP where David Mugar presides over Boston's Fourth of July celebration is the best place to see the fireworks, and to contemplate future political fireworks. This year, the political talk focused on speculation that Governor Romney might resign this fall and hand off the chief executive's office to Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey.

Asked to respond, Eric Fehrstrom, Romney's spokesman, said any thought that Romney will resign is "absolutely, positively false." Added Fehrstrom, via e-mail: "What you are hearing is completely uninformed speculation. Governor Romney will serve out his full term."

Two previous Republican governors set a precedent for early exit. William F. Weld resigned to pursue a nomination as ambassador to Mexico, leaving the office to his lieutenant governor, Paul Cellucci; after winning election in his own right, Cellucci resigned to become ambassador to Canada, leaving the office to his lieutenant governor, Jane Swift.

Romney has no one but himself to blame for the speculation — unless he wants to blame his consultant, Michael Murphy, or perhaps his lieutenant governor.

Following the road map outlined by Murphy, Romney began testing the waters for a national campaign early this year. So far, Murphy's plan is working well — beyond Massachusetts's borders. Romney's travels around the country are earning him prominent mention as a potential GOP presidential candidate for 2008.

However, back at home, there is a downside to the national attention. Romney's political clout and capital are diminished in the Bay State, where few Democrats or Republicans expect he will seek reelection. It makes it even harder than ever for Romney to advance beyond the proposal stage in three major priorities of his State of the State address: healthcare, job growth, and education.

For those happily drafting Romney's local political obituary, contemplating a Weld-Cellucci exit strategy for the current governor is not illogical. Such a scenario would greatly benefit Healey, who is planning a gubernatorial run of her own.

In politics, fund-raising is considered the first vote. By that calculation, Attorney General Thomas F. Reilly has 3 million of them. Reilly's \$3 million war chest for his race for governor sets new campaign finance records for gubernatorial candidates and even incumbent governors at this point in the campaign. Meanwhile, the AG's Democratic opponent, Deval Patrick, continues to generate favorable buzz, but he is spending money almost at the same rate as he is raising it. Since January, Patrick raised \$551,912 and spent \$541,057. He put \$300,000 of his own money into his effort, giving him a current balance of \$310,855. If you take out his own money, Patrick has \$10,855 in the bank — less than Maura Hennigan, the Boston city councilor who has \$23,000 to take on Mayor Thomas M. Menino and his \$1.1 million campaign warchest.

Of course, Reilly is able to keep his campaign expenses down because he has only a tiny campaign operation made up of three staff people outside the AG's office. Inside the AG's office, Reilly recently added new staffers, on top of an already heavy PR staff, to help massage the message. He will start up a major campaign headquarters in the fall.

When it comes to the policy debate about illegal immigrants, Thomas P. O'Neill III is putting his clout on the immigrants' side and taking on the Romney administration as he does it. O'Neill, the son of the late House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr., read about the 18-year-old student chronicled in this space on July 5 ("Illegal dreams"). The young woman qualified for a special scholarship set up by Romney to reward outstanding performance on the Commonwealth's MCAS testing system. However, the scholarship offer was rescinded because the young woman is the child of illegal immigrants. O'Neill is extending financial help to the student through a scholarship fund he runs for city youngsters, which is called Blues Brothers' Walk for Kids. His firm, O'Neill & Associates, will also lobby pro bono for pending legislation that would allow children of illegal immigrants to pay in-state college tuition rates. "Opening doors by creating opportunities is just something we should do as Democrats," said O'Neill.

Romney opposes the in-state tuition bill. He looks to be testing immigration as a campaign issue. His test of those national political waters was the talk of the roof — and remains the talk of the town.

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