Is Pennsylvania Governor-in-waiting Mark Schweiker a horse or isn’t he a horse? No, not that kind of horse! A candidate horse – is he running for election? Does he intend to be both Pennsylvania’s next governor and Pennsylvania’s next elected governor?

Or will he be content to just horse around for the next 15 months – to be a caretaker governor who weeds and waters Tom Ridge’s Pennsylvania domains. And who will keep Ridge’s seat warm until the next election?

Schweiker himself will have to answer these questions in the days and weeks ahead. But, he’s not going to have much time. Intense pressure in various Republican circles has already begun. A good deal of it is coming from Rs still searching for a gubernatorial candidate, seen as more likely to defeat Democrats Bob Casey or Ed Rendell.

For these GOP faithful, Schweiker’s imminent ascension is a prayer answered – a dream come true. Rather than having to face resurgent state Democrats with a compromise candidate emerging from a fractious party primary, state Republicans would be running an incumbent. If Schweiker runs he will be Gov. Schweiker, an incumbent of 15 months running for governor on the record of a popular, just retired governor gone off to Washington to fight evildoers. And for some perspective on how long 15 months can be in political life, check the calendar. George Bush barely elected president now has a 90 percent approval rating, just eight months into office.

If a Hollywood scriptwriter had sent this script to the front office, it would be sent back for a rewrite. But in real life it works well enough. The characters are all well defined, and the action is clear and compelling. Only the plot line needs some work

There are two scenarios here – each with starkly different implications. In the first and simplest one, Schweiker announces over the next two or three weeks that he is not a candidate – that he will finish Ridge’s unexpired term, will continue to support Attorney General Mike Fisher for governor and will leave public life as he indicated last October.

If this scenario unfolds, the ongoing fratricide within the state GOP between Treasurer Barbara Hafer and Fisher will continue – to one of two possible conclusions. One of them will emerge as a heavy underdog against the Democrats’ nominee (either Casey or Rendell, with the smart money now favoring Casey).

The second possible plot line gets a little more complicated. Schweiker announces that he is a candidate for governor. He has agonized over his prior decision, but conditions have changed, and he now believes it is his duty, his obligation, to carry out the unfinished work of the Ridge/Schweiker administration.

He’s a horse!
At this point, egos and pocketbooks come into play. After spending a year in campaign mode, meaning scores of chicken dinners, fundraisers and rallying the party faithful, Mike Fisher and Barbara Hafer may not want to step aside. After all, it’s been their sandbox and now suddenly the new kid jumps in, after he told everybody he didn’t want to play anymore and didn’t even particularly like the sand.

What will they do? Our drama offers a couple of sharp forks here. Fork one is a dilemma. On the one hand, well-bred Republicans don’t run against incumbent governors (or other incumbent Republicans for that matter). It is something Republicans desperately try to avoid. But on the other hand, these are not normal times.

In the end, it’s going to be a tough call for the Hafer and Fisher. It’s probably the last shot at the brass ring for both. After long and distinguished careers, both are constitutionally term limited and can’t run for re-election to their current offices. Moreover – and adding to the dilemma – all of this is going to happen very fast. If Schweiker does become a candidate, he won’t be well known at first. His electoral strength will be unclear. In fact, either Fisher or Hafer or even both of them might show more strength then Schweiker in the crucial early primary polls.

Bottom line: It is entirely plausible that Fisher and or Hafer will stay in against Schweiker, waging a fight to the finish for the GOP nomination, rendering Republicans badly split for their already uphill fight against state Democrats in the fall.

Now to sharp fork two – and a more pleasant future for state Republicans. Schweiker announces and both Fisher and Hafer graciously bow out in favor of the incumbent governor. Schweiker avoids a bitter primary fight, inherits Ridge’s prestige and record (as well as his vaunted fund raising organization), and goes forth to do battle with his Democrat opponent.

Which of these scripts will play out over the next few weeks? Who knows? Like almost everyone else, we plan to stay tuned. But we do know that the pressure on Schweiker is going to grow inexorably until he makes an unequivocal decision and announces it. Hamlet on the Susquehanna is not a role that he can play.

At a recent press conference Ridge introduced Schweiker, saying that he was “very comfortable with Gov. Mark Schweiker. Very comfortable.” And comfortable is a word that people often use in describing Schweiker. But, in the end, Schweiker himself being comfortable is what it may be all about. A man, who had become completely comfortable with the notion that he was leaving public life, must now decide if he is still comfortable with that decision. It may not be the first decision that he makes as governor – but it surely will be the most important.

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