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Battles emerge for Legislature control

**By MIKE DENNISON**  
**Gazette State Bureau**

HELENA - As Democrat Lane Larson prepares to defend his state Senate seat in the district stretching from Billings to Miles City, he knows he has a target on his back.

"I'm under no illusions that I wasn't going to have a tough race," he says.

Larson, 50, an electrician who lives in Lockwood, is being challenged by Republican Taylor Brown, a longtime Billings radio personality.

### **SD22 key race**

The contest in Senate District 22, however, isn't just another legislative race. It's among the key races that may decide party control of the 2009 Montana Legislature, which is shaping up as one of this year's premier political contests.

Beginning Tuesday, Montana candidates can officially file to run in this crowded political year, which features races for U.S. Senate, U.S. House, governor, Supreme Court chief justice and other statewide offices.

Yet many of these top individual races may not be races at all, with incumbents heavily favored to win.

Party officials say this possible lack of close competition in the top-tier races is shifting attention down the ladder to the Legislature, where party control is entirely up for grabs.

"We've really put a focus on the Legislature this time around," said Erik Iverson, chairman of the Montana Republican Party. "We need to control that Legislature not only for the policy reasons, but for party-building and recruiting reasons.

### **'Rebuild a party'**

"We're trying to rebuild a party and get a governing majority back, and we have to start with the Legislature."

Going into the 2008 election, Democrats hold a 26-24 majority in the Senate and Republicans have a 50-49 edge in the House. Constitution Party Rep. Rick Jore of Ronan, who normally votes with the Republicans, holds the 100th House seat, but he's not running for re-election.

Neither party is laying claim to any special advantage for winning the House, which is bound to remain closely divided and whose swing districts are many, diverse and difficult

to predict.

All 100 House seats are up for election, along with half of the 50 Senate seats.

But in the Senate, Republicans feel they have the edge going in - and some Democrats are saying privately that they agree.

Of the 25 Senate seats up for election this year, Republicans must defend only nine of them, while 16 Democratic seats are on the line.

To make matters tougher for Democrats in the Senate, they're losing several incumbents in districts that lean Republican. The incumbents either can't run for re-election because of term limits or have chosen not to run again.

The GOP has recruited what it sees as strong candidates in those districts and several other races that look competitive, and think it can win the two or three of these seats needed to win majority control.

"We're in excellent position right now to win control of the Senate," said Iverson.

One of these key battlegrounds is the race between Larson and Brown in SD22, which runs 150 miles along the Yellowstone River from the Billings area to Miles City, including the towns of Colstrip, Forsyth, Huntley and Hysham.

Larson won the seat in 2004 by 490 votes out of about 8,600 cast. It was one of a half-dozen races where Democrats pulled off close victories as they took control of the Senate for the first time in 12 years.

The matchup here this time around looks like a microcosm of the campaign debate likely to play out across the state in 2008.

Larson, like his fellow Democrats, is saying they've done a good job since they've won the governorship in 2004 and essentially controlled the Legislature, presiding over a mostly booming economy and more funding for schools, health care and other items.

"Hey, we're on the right track, and we want to continue that," he said. "You can talk the doom-and-gloom stuff, but we really are doing well in Montana."

Brown, who owns the Northern Broadcasting System based in Billings and is a well-known farm broadcaster on radio and TV, says he'll be a voice for business, which needs lower taxes and less regulation to thrive.

"My hope is that our representation will be a lot stronger in areas that matter to the Chamber of Commerce," he said. "I will be a strong voice for lower taxes, for business, for stronger private property rights."

Brown, 51, who grew up on a ranch near Sand Springs and lives now in Huntley, said he'll also emphasize his ties to agriculture in the largely rural district.

Larson, who grew up in the district and has worked as an electrician "from one end of the district to the other," said he'll campaign hard against an opponent he expects will be well-funded.

"My biggest challenge is to let people know (how) I've represented them for the past four years," he said. "It's my home; I know a lot of folks here."

Both sides also say they've had no problem recruiting candidates in the two dozen or so races that will swing the balance of power in both the House and Senate.

Rep. Bob Bergren, a Havre Democrat who's been helping recruit candidates, said Democrats remember the 2007 Legislature as one where conservative Republicans controlled the leadership of the House and forced a special legislative session when they wouldn't agree to a budget.

"There was a clear line drawn in the sand," Bergren said. "Everybody was sort of drifting toward the center, and they took a hard right, and that doesn't represent Montana. We're light-years from where we were last (election) in recruiting."

Iverson said Republicans are eager to turn the tables on Democratic Gov. Brian Schweitzer, who's up for re-election and who has been having his way at the Legislature.

"We've done a really good job of recruiting good candidates in the key races," he said. "There is sort of a general 'Schweitzer fatigue' that has set in out there, and that's given our candidates a lot of energy."

Published on Monday, January 21, 2008.

Last modified on 1/21/2008 at 12:29 am

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what do you mean? said 23 hours ago

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GO TAYLOR GO!!!!

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JackB said 23 hours ago

[Rating: 1](#) ▲▼

Senate District 22 needs better representation, not just someone who will be a good foot soldier for the governor. I'm supporting Taylor Brown!

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Montana Vet said 21 hours ago

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Sportsmen and women had better support Lane Larsen in this battle. Mr. Larsen sponsored the bridge access bill and supported all pro average sportmen freindly bills in the last legislature. Mr. Brown has already proclaimed that he will try to strengthen private property rights at the expense of public property rights. Why not Mr.Brown's family ranch is making money commercializing our wildlife resources by charging \$100.00 per gun to hunt on their ranch. This guy will do nothing but proliferate the stockgrowers and outfitters continued commercialization and exploitation of our public wildlife. This commercialization is what is driving our access issues in this state. Don't believe him when he says he is pro sportmen, he will be just another ag head in the legislature who try's to do everything he can to ensure that private landowners will continue their exclusive and commercial use of our public resources.

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CarsonCityKid said 21 hours ago

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I know Lane Larson well enough to think he is the best thing that has happened to District 22 in a long time. We don't need another media personality who can claim he is a pro business/Chamber of Commerce yes man that will sell the rest of Montanan's rights down the river all in the name of making a buck. I don't need somebody in a cowboy hat telling me how great he is going to be just because he can say "tell 'em Taylor sent ya" and what we don't need is a car salesman attitude trying to make policy for the rest of us.

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Montana Vet said 20 hours ago

[Rating: 0](#) ▲▼

I have new commercial that will be played if Mr. Brown win's: They will show a hunter going to the door of a private land owner to ask to hunt, which of course they willbe denied; the hunter will turn and say " Taylor Brown Sent Me, so charge me double".

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Wildcatter78 said 19 hours ago

[Rating: 0](#) ▲▼

A couple of years ago I saw Lane Larson participate on a discussion panel and he didn't know that the state constitution mandates revenue earned off of state lands goes to schools and that developing the Otter Creek tracts would end our school funding issues. I cannot and will not support someone who doesn't even take the time to learn Montana's law.

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Henry said 19 hours ago

[Rating: -1](#) ▲▼

Montana Vet is the type of attitude that is dangerous. Private property rights should not need to be strengthened because they should be ABSOLUTE as far as permission granted trespass goes. If someone wants to charge a fee on their private property that is and should be their right UNINFRINGED by those that selfishly think they should have the right to run over any place and anybody they please. Montana Vet you are a prime example of the prevalent attitude that made me decide to severely restrict public access to my property. Specifically you do not seem to respect OUR rights as property owners. The wildlife may be public but the private landowners raise it for you clowns to shoot totally uncompensated unless they charge a fee. Also most of us go the extra mile to use conservation practices that enhance wildlife development again uncompensated and then we listen to selfish pompous dogs in the manger like you berate us. We don't need Taylor Brown in the state Senate we need him in Washington instead of the Boobsy twin Senators we have now.

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gabby109 said 17 hours ago

[Rating: 0](#) ▲▼

Larson is another contractor that runs, so he has health care for himself, no other reason. If you can not protect private property than what are you going to protect.

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Montana Vet said 16 hours ago

[Rating: 0](#) ▲▼

Henry- when you landowners start paying your own way and stop taking subsidies from public tax payers, you can talk. You need to educate yourself on the history of wildlife management in Montana. In 1948 the Montana Supreme court ruled that impacts from wildlife are a condition of ownership of land in the state. So if you don't like feeding the animals then sell your land. Also I wonder if you take some of the landowner sponsored tags every year for your personal use, just another subsidy to you land owners. I also wonder if you are paying commercial rate taxes on the public resources you are harvesting. I think not. If you are so interested in managing the numbers of wildlife in this state then lets shut down hunting for bull elk and buck deer in areas that wildlife numbers are over objective. I can here you screeching right now. Also lets stop subsidies to outfitters in the form of set aside licenses. Ranchers and Outfitters should have to compete just the same as my business does. Remember the US Supreme court ruled that wildlife are property of the people to managed for the benefit of the common citizens and not to be managed for personal or commercial gain. One thing the ag community had better remember is that you are the minority and that is why our elections have been swinging in the direction of public interest over private interest. Public property rights should be held at the same level as private proerty rights.

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Henry said 14 hours ago

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Montana Vet - You need to deal with your obvious envy and hate for landowners. You apparently didn't get to recreate for free on someone elses property in the past and now you are mad. WAAAA WAAAA Like I care. Subsidies? Don't get em so I guess I'll talk all I want - Why don't you educate yourself about the government and agriculture so you have a clue why you have an abundance of cheap food. There is a long history there that a lot of your type should look into before you shoot off your stupid mouth. Sell my land if I don't like to feed the animals - silly person - MY BUSINESS IS FEEDING ANIMALS. I enjoy the wildlife but I guarantee NOBODY as arrogant as you sound will ever set foot inside my property and not be arrested. Why don't you go BUY YOUR OWN LAND - what a novel idea - then you wouldn't have to whine about others that you envy. Have enough guts and ambition to become one of us - then see how you feel about your silly rant. Threaten the Ag community - the biggest sector of the econmony in Montana - because someone didn't let you hunt - WAAA WAAA! Gawd we are just scared to death! By the way - I don't buy tags - any tags - I like beef. MY BEEF. Go ahead and shut down the hunting like you say - won't affect me one bit - cept I won't have to put up with parasites on two legs for 3 months a year. THAT would be wonderful!

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