

Kentucky GOP brace for potential 3-way race for US Senate in 2026

BY DAVID CATANESE
MCLATCHY WASHINGTON BUREAU

Andy Barr would begin with a federal campaign account affording him millions of dollars but have to confront the reality that he's little known to most of Kentucky.

Daniel Cameron could ride the familiarity of having run statewide twice but carries the scars from his humbling loss in the governor's race.

And Nate Morris would occupy the outsider's lane of a non-politician but soon find himself answering questions about his stewardship of a Lexington company now struggling financially.

Kentucky's senior senator, Mitch McConnell, has yet to verbalize his expected exit from the U.S. Senate in 2027, but that hasn't stopped would-be aspirants from beginning to maneuver for what Kentucky Republicans expect to be an open seat three-way GOP primary clash in the 2026 campaign cycle.

Hovering over it all is the singular force of President Trump and whether he can be coaxed into endorsing one of the candidates by a circling swarm of influencers.

Cameron, the former attorney general; Barr, the seven-term congressman; and Morris, the former CEO of Rubicon Technologies, a tech-driven waste removal company, are assumed to be the most likely U.S. Senate candidates if, as anticipated, the 82-year-old McConnell announces his retirement by this spring. None of the men have officially declared their

candidacies, but their soft launches are materializing.

And Republicans from Washington to Frankfort are now sizing up the early strength of each of their candidacies as the contenders become more open about their ambitions.

DANIEL CAMERON HAS 'MORE TO PROVE'

"Cameron has more to prove he can win than Andy Barr," said John McCarthy, a Republican National Committee member from Kentucky, referring to Cameron's defeat in the 2023 governor's race. "Andy works hard and folks know him."



Nate Morris



Andy Barr



Daniel Cameron

In that way, Cameron's loss to Gov. Andy Beshear is a double-edged sword.

While it raised his name recognition and profile in all corners of the state, the outcome also undercut his burgeoning reputation as a fearsome political force. Cameron earned Trump's early and enthusiastic backing for his campaign,

but the president later blamed his defeat on "the stench of Mitch McConnell."

Cameron has already sought to stress his allegiance to Trump while papering over his closeness to McConnell.

But Republican observers also said Cameron would need to demonstrate financial strength quickly in order to quash the perception that he's a weak fundraiser.

"Can Cameron put together the war chest he needs in order to run? How much do the McConnell people help

him? Because he's not a great fundraiser on his own," said Tres Watson, a Republican political and public affairs consultant.

Cameron's political action committee, dubbed "All 120 PAC," has not raised much money by statewide standards. In its first eight months, the PAC brought in \$26,000, according to records at the Federal Elections Commission.

Jaryd Crum, a Paintsville, Ky. attorney and Cameron backer, predicted Republican voters wouldn't hold Cameron's gubernatorial performance against him in a Senate contest.

"Daniel has to be seen as the front-runner. Barr has done a good job for Lexington, but I don't know how many people know him outside the 6th District," said Crum.

Tyler Glick, a Louisville-based Republican consultant said Cameron has been working on improving his donor base.

"That was a deficiency in the race against Beshear. No one doubts Barr's prowess as a fundraiser," he said.

ANDY BARR'S WARCHEST

Though he was passed up by his colleagues in Washington to chair the House Financial Services Committee, Barr remains a top member there, providing him access to a deep-pocketed donor network.

Barr carried a \$3.7 million transferable campaign account into 2025 and operatives expect him to stockpile north of \$5 million by the time he formally launches a Senate campaign.

That'll likely make Barr the best-financed candidate at the outset, allowing him the opportunity to increase his profile outside the 6th Congressional District.

"He has the experience, a strong conservative record and I think is acceptable to most of the various factions within the Kentucky Republican Party," said TJ Litafik, a Kentucky-based political strategist who has spoken to Barr about his intentions to run.

Though Barr is viewed as a mainstream Republican, he's made a point of showcasing his fealty to Trump in recent months, serving as his state chairman in 2024 and echoing the president's call for the release of those charged with crimes for attacking the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

For both Barr and Cameron, their chief goal as a Senate candidate would be to earn the backing of Trump.

But GOP operatives say the more realistic achievement might be to just keep the president neutral, especially as some of his allies attempt to push him towards Morris.

THE NATE MORRIS PLAY FOR POTUS

Morris has spent much of the opening weeks of Trump's second term signaling his support for the administration and his proximity to its players, for instance, posting a picture around the inauguration with his "buddy," Vice President JD Vance and another one with Tulsi Gabbard after her Senate confirmation Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Morris uploaded a video taking an implicit shot at his two rivals for saying they'd only run if McConnell retires and suggesting he might not wait for Kentucky's senior senator to bow out before he gets in.

"If you're asking for permission from Mitch McConnell to run for the Senate in Kentucky, then you shouldn't be running in the first place, because

you're not running for the right reasons," Morris said. "I'm inspired to possibly run by people like President Trump and my dear friend JD Vance, true outsiders."

Morris' video, posted to X, was endorsed by Trump's eldest son, Don Jr., who warned all 2026 contenders that to earn his support they'd need to break with McConnell.

"The Vance team and much of their consulting class is trying to circle the wagons around Nate Morris," noted a Washington-based Republican Senate strategist who is unaligned in the contest and agreed to speak on background in exchange for anonymity.

"But that doesn't extend to the president as of yet. You're talking about three people who are going to be strong allies of the president. Is there enough fog of war here to keep the president neutral?"

Morris has also been on an extended tour of Kentucky, posting photos with elected figures from all corners of the commonwealth on Instagram and X for the last several months.

Morris, who is also close to Rand Paul, is clearly seeking to leverage his working class union roots with his entrepreneurial experience to try and capitalize on a populist thirst for sending a political newcomer to Washington.

He could also potentially pour millions of his own money into the endeavor.

But allies of other candidates have already begun circulating possible vulnerabilities in group chats.

One Kentucky Republican received a screen shot this week depicting the slumping stock of Rubicon Technologies, which was founded by Morris in 2008. Morris

stepped down as CEO in 2022 after the company went public and hit financial headwinds. On Wednesday, Rubicon was trading at just seven cents a share; it went public at \$60 a share.

Morris may also be forced to explain a \$5,000 donation in 2021 to the political action committee of Nikki Haley, who went on to be Trump's fiercest Republican opponent in the 2024 presidential primary.

Morris himself has stipulated he hasn't yet decided to run for Senate or governor, but his personal rhetoric signals he's inclined to fashion himself as an ultra-MAGA candidate that Trump won't be able to ignore.

One of the most powerful men in Frankfort, Senate President Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, cautioned that getting ahead of McConnell might come back to haunt anyone who looks like they are pushing aside a Kentucky legend.

"For a gentleman who has been there for 40 years and has done a lot for this state, I think people should give him deference and let him decide the terms of whether he runs or doesn't run and how he announces it, instead of going out in front and trying to secure a political position," Stivers said. "I don't think that would be helpful in the long run."

But the Washington Republican Senate consultant said the reality is that any reverence toward McConnell would ultimately give way to a once-in-a-generation opportunity to secure a Senate seat in an era dominated by Trump.

"Mitch McConnell is to Republican politics what the Bubonic plague was to the Middle Ages," quipped the consultant.

Austin Horn contributed reporting

Bill would create criminal penalties for legislative 'interference'

BY JAMES MAYSE
MESSENGER-INQUIRER

A bill filed in Frankfort would criminalize forms of protest in the state Capitol complex that disrupt the General Assembly.

House Bill 399 was filed by Rep. John Blanton, A Salyersville Republican and a retired Kentucky State Police trooper.

The bill would create a new criminal offense, "interference with a legislative proceeding." If approved, a person could be charged with first-degree or second-degree interference, depending on their conduct.

Attempts to contact Blanton were made on

Feb. 7 and Feb. 11. In both cases, a staff member in Blanton's office said Blanton was not available, and said to email Blanton for an interview. Blanton never responded to emails, which included a list of questions.



Rep. John Blanton

Protests aren't uncommon at the state Capitol during legislative sessions when contentious bills are under consideration. In 2018, the Kentucky Education Association drew thousands of teachers to the Capitol to protest changes to state pensions that were attached to an unrelated bill and passed on party lines.

In 2022, demonstrators

protesting a House bill containing abortion restrictions were escorted out of the House gallery after they began shouting and waving banners during a vote on the bill.

House Bill 399 defines first-degree interference as, when a person has the intent to "disrupt, impede or prevent the General Assembly from conducting business," a person "engages in, conspires to engage in or facilitates another person engaging in disorderly or disruptive conduct in any legislative building."

The bill does not define "disorderly or disruptive conduct," other than to say the conduct "disrupts, impedes or prevents the General Assembly from doing business."

Questions asking what constitutes "disorderly or disruptive conduct" under the bill, or what conduct would be considered conspiracy or facilitation were emailed to Blanton, who did not reply. State law does define criminal conspiracy as when people agree that at least one of them will commit a crime, or when a person aids another in the commission of a crime.

Criminal facilitation is defined by state law as knowingly providing a person with the means or opportunity to commit a crime.

Under Blanton's bill, second-degree criminal interference occurs when a person intends to "disrupt, impede or prevent" legisla-

tive business, and "enters into or remains inside" or "conspires to enter into or remain inside" a "chamber of gallery of the General Assembly" or another other room in the Capitol complex.

A person found "obstructing or impeding a legislator, legislative officer or legislative staff member's ingress, egress or movement" within the Capitol, or conspiring or facilitating someone else doing so, would also be guilty of second-degree interference.

Blanton was asked via email if simply being in the House gallery, without engaging in any other conduct, would be enough to be charged with second-degree interference. Blanton was also asked

through email if protesters could be charged with interference if they were chanting in the rotunda and could be heard inside the House. Blanton didn't respond to questions.

Blanton was also asked if the conduct under the bill was already covered by existing state law, specifically the law against disorderly conduct.

Second-degree disorderly conduct pertains to public places, and a person charged must have the intent to cause "public inconvenience or alarm." The definition of disorderly conduct includes "unreasonable noise" and creating a "hazardous or physically offensive condition by any act that serves no legitimate purpose."

MAN

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front of his patrol car, knocking it off the road.

The chase continued to Plummer Branch Road when Vanguilder allegedly ditched his car and took off into the woods. McIntosh said he chased him into a creek bed, where Vanguilder continued to resist arrest and was Tased to "prevent further injury," according to the citation.

A search of the vehicle revealed 4 grams of meth-

amphetamine and \$60 in cash, according to the citation.

Once in custody, Vanguilder allegedly told

McIntosh, "Man, I didn't drag you that bad," according to the citation, and added that he had fled from police before.

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LEGAL NOTICE

PUBLIC NOTICE REGARDING ADOPTION OF ORDINANCE
The County of Owen, Kentucky (the "County"), hereby gives public notice that at the regularly scheduled meeting of the County Fiscal Court held in the Owen County Courthouse, 100 N. Thomas Street, Owenton, Kentucky 40359, on the 11th day of February, 2025, at 5:00 p.m., EST (local time), Ordinance #248 ("Water Plant Road Ordinance") identified by its title and summarized as follows was given a second reading and adopted by the Fiscal Court of the County, as provided by KRS 67.077: ORDINANCE #248 AN ORDINANCE RELATING TO THE DISCONTINUANCE OF WATER PLANT ROAD.

SUMMARY
Ordinance #248 The Water Plant Road Ordinance authorizes: The discontinuance of Water Plant Road, in Owen County, Kentucky, beginning at its inception where it intersects with Davis Lake Road then through property owned Lake S'Mores, Inc for approximately .376 miles/ 1958.28 feet until the end of county maintenance on the property belonging to Lake S'Mores, Inc. The above-described Water Plant Road shall revert to the owners, and the Owen Fiscal Court shall have no obligation to maintain.

The full text of Ordinance #248 Water Plant Road Ordinance is on file in the office of the Owen County Judge Executive, Owen County Courthouse, 100 N. Thomas Street, Owenton, Kentucky 40359, where they will be available for public inspection between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.

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22 Ac. Owen Co., Greenup Road, open ridge top to build on, woods and hills to play on, city water, \$141,900, \$8,000 down.

6 Ac. Near Long Ridge, Hwy. 36, pasture, scattered trees, double wides welcome, view, city water, \$52,900, \$2,500 down, \$520 per mo.

8-1/2 Ac. Owen Co., gently rolling pasture, large pond, restricted homesite, on paved dead end road, \$86,900, \$3,000 down.

5 Ac. New Liberty, rolling pasture, single wides welcome, approved for septic, city water available, \$51,900, \$2,500 down.

2-1/2 Ac. Glencoe area, just off Hwy. 127, mostly open, some woods, 5 miles off I-71, city water, \$2,500 down, \$275 per mo.

Check our website for more properties.
www.tri-statelandcompany.com