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Salt Lake City Mayor Race

Buhler: The man who would rewrite SLC history

By Derek P. Jensen
The Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated: 10/28/2007 12:45:47 AM MDT

Gripping a fresh handful of candy corn, Dave Buhler moseys through a cinnamon-scented living room in Rose Park when three kids burst in.

"What's your name?" he crouches to ask a sprightly young girl in purple.

"Hannah."

"Hannah Montana?" Buhler teases before the open-house host reminds him she is too young to vote.

Channeling such charm and rebuilding his brand have been priorities all year for the mayoral "underdog," who markets an aw-shucks reasonableness in living rooms and on billboards that he figures Salt Lake City voters are ready to buy after eight acrimonious years under Rocky Anderson.

A shrewd politician, Buhler also has toiled to define the contest as a choice between a pragmatic manager and an esoteric planner - he calls opponent Ralph Becker a "dreamer" - prone to paralysis by too much analysis.

Besides Becker, though, Buhler is battling history - and personal demons. He was soundly squashed by Deedee Corradini in the 1991 mayor's race. He lost a re-election bid to the Utah Senate in 1998. And he certainly is aware of the well-worn yarn that neither an active Mormon nor a Republican has won Salt Lake City's left-tilting mayor's chair in three decades.

But Buhler, whose quick wit and indefatigable attitude belie his image, intends to overcome both.

Scribbled on a white board in his spartan campaign office downtown is a smudge-filled "Days to Victory" headline. Underneath, it reads "25,000 votes to win."

"Out of the last three primary elections in SLC," the printed pep talk reads, "Dave has the closest margin this time. Only 45-49 percent of the vote has turned out for the general election. We will change this."

Dave the doer: For 10 months, the two-term city councilman has crashed living rooms across the capital like a college recruiter. He does the

door-to-door stump, too, but insists open houses offer a closer connection to likely voters.

"It's a smaller percentage compared to what we mail, but it's more effective," says Buhler's volunteer coordinator, Barbara Thornton. "Plus, there's food."

With precious days left before Nov. 6, Buhler hustles to as many intimate meetings as he can. On a single day last week, he hit two, squeezed between a

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A table full of campaign literature stands ready for... (Paul Fraughton/The Salt Lake Tribune)

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pair of debates.

Munching pumpkin pie with a handful of residents from American Towers, Buhler patiently fields questions about panhandling, crime at Pioneer Park and whether he would promise not to promote a national agenda as mayor.

"Will you stay in town occasionally?" asks one woman, begging Buhler not to host protests should a President Hillary Clinton come to the Beehive State. "Will I not be embarrassed watching national news?"

Chuckling, the father of five assures the group, "I will not be like Rocky."

Instead, he pledges to get a grip on City Hall. He talks about passing out panhandler "do's and don'ts" cards - and making them get business licenses - and cleaning up Pioneer Park the way Rudy Giuliani scrubbed New York.

Buhler also swats at Becker, arguing the mild-mannered minority leader of the Utah House would be a less effective mayor.

"He's a nice guy," Buhler tells the sparse gathering, "but he won't get anything done."

The scrappy underdog says he is "still confused" about Becker's stance on Buhler's idea to put crime cameras in Pioneer Park. He notes that his rival's vow to place a high-level staffer over education "doesn't make any sense."

If elected, Buhler says he would hold open-door meetings for the public - À la Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon. And he pledges to hit most City Council huddles.

Branding Buhler: If you believe his TV spots and billboards, Buhler is the (root) beer-and-pretzels counter to Becker's wine and cheese.

He is the booze candidate ready to reform the city's zany liquor laws; the regular guy; the doer, not the dreamer. He talks frequently about being raised west of Liberty Park with a dad who worked as a cop.

His rep can be credited to adman-turned-consultant Tom Love, president of Love Communications, who has remade Buhler's sometimes stuffy image for an electorate that appears more progressive than ever. An example: Love set up a recent fundraiser at the Oyster Bar, a hip hangout near the upper-crust New Yorker.

Love calls it "bad form" that Becker pays out-of-state firms for his paid media when the urban-planning professional professes to buy local first.

"You need to put your money where your mouth is," Love says about Becker. "Nothing is more local than a city mayor's race."

Besides Buhler's brand, Love has helped steer his client's attack strategy. Each week, the campaign unveils "to-do" lists that offer a bullet-point tally of initiatives and then scorch Becker for a lackluster record. The hits include public safety - Buhler has the major police endorsement - and downtown development, even the environment.

The strategy is simple: Cast Becker as an aloof lawmaker lost in the jungle of planning jargon. By contrast, Buhler says he has been doing the city's business "every day" for eight years.

"There's a real fine line for how aggressive-negative he can go to take down Becker without taking down himself," says Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah.

So sometimes the tactics are innocuous.

Last week, Thornton and her helpers planted life-size cardboard cutouts of their candidate outside KUTV's Main Street news studio for extra exposure.

"Guerrilla warfare," she shrugs.

Two transients then approach Buhler's aide for spare change. She hands them leftover campaign cookies.

Beating back history: Moments after walking into the Rose Park open house, Buhler announces, "We walked this neighborhood not long ago."

"People are nice to us over here," Thornton adds.

Indeed, Buhler fared well on the west end in September's primary, while Becker failed to carry a single west-side precinct.

"We would not have done as well in this part of town if we didn't have a lot of Democrats supporting me," he says. "Some of them secretly."

It is a performance he may need to repeat to overcome Becker's presumed lead - both in the polls and at the bank. According to the most recent campaign-finance disclosures, Buhler trails Becker in the money chase by more than \$125,000.



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As a Mormon Republican, Buhler also faces an uphill battle to dig out of the city's demographic slant.

Jowers says Buhler has run the best wholesale campaign and also has been better in most debates. Still, Jowers says, many people leaving candidate forums say Buhler won the debate but they are nonetheless voting for Becker.

"He has an aggressive, focused message," Jowers says. But "Buhler is faced with tough demographics and a real tough opponent."

He also is staring down a 30-plus-year dry spell for GOP mayors in Utah's capital. But Buhler is confident he can rewrite history.

"Mayor," announces one Rose Park resident who shakes loose a grin from the hopeful as he shakes his hand.

"Well," Buhler responds. "We're working on it."

djensen@sltrib.com

Dave Buhler

PERSONAL

* Born July 13, 1957, in Salt Lake City, grew up in Liberty Park neighborhood

* Married Lori Goaslind, July 7, 1982; five children

EDUCATION

* Bachelor's degree in political science and history, University of Utah

* Master's in public administration, Brigham Young University

PROFESSIONAL

* Staff assistant and later director of constituent services for Sen. Orrin Hatch's Salt Lake City office, 1979-84

* Administrative assistant to Gov. Norm Bangerter, 1984-89

* Executive director, Utah Department of Commerce, 1989-92

* Vice president, Experior Assessments (formerly National Assessment Institute) 1992-2000

* Associate commissioner for public affairs, Utah System of Higher Education, 2000-present

* Adjunct faculty member in political science, U. of U., 1990-2006

POLITICAL AND CIVIC SERVICE

* Campaign manager, Bangerter re-election, 1988

* Salt Lake City mayoral candidate, 1991

* Elected to Utah Senate, 1994 (defeated for re-election in 1998), served 1995-99

* Elected to Salt Lake City Council, 1999 (re-elected in 2003)

* Salt Lake City School Volunteers Board of Directors, 1992-93

* This Is the Place Foundation board of trustees, 1997-99, 2006-present

* Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce Board of Governors, 2000-present

* Utah Advisory Board, Trust for Public Lands, 2005-present

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