

Reid retiring, wants Schumer as Senate Dem leader

By **CHARLES BABINGTON**
and **ERICA WERNER**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, a pugnacious and glamour-averse tactician who united Democrats to help deliver tough victories for President Barack Obama, said Friday he’s retiring next year. He immediately endorsed brash New York Sen. Chuck Schumer to succeed him as leader of a party desperate to regain the Senate majority.

Reid, 75, rose from hardscrabble beginnings in Nevada, and brought his amateur boxer’s tenacity to the pinnacle of congressional politics.

Friends said his doggedness and indifference to popularity helped rebuff Republicans who fiercely oppose Obama on health care, spending, immigration and other issues. But critics say Reid added to Washington’s poisonous partisanship, particularly by changing Senate filibuster rules in 2013 to enable Obama to appoint more judges.

On Friday, Schumer seized the inside track to succeed Reid as the Democratic Senate leader after next year’s elections. Potential rival Dick Durbin of Illinois said he would back Schumer. Durbin is currently Reid’s



In this Feb. 26 file photo, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nev., accompanied by House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of Calif., gestures during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington. Reid is announcing he will not seek re-election to another term.

No. 2; Schumer is No. 3.

Stylistically, Reid and Schumer are miles apart. Schumer is voluble, outgoing, eager to talk campaign strategy, on TV or anywhere else. He sometimes works with Republicans, including an ultimately unsuccessful effort to overhaul immigration laws in 2013.

But Schumer, 64, is a partisan fighter too, hailed by colleagues as

a top fundraiser and strategist. He headed the party’s Senate campaign operations in 2006 and 2008, when Democrats made sizable gains. Colleagues’ gratitude helped him surpass Durbin as Reid’s likely successor.

Schumer, who spent much of Friday phoning fellow Democratic senators, said in a statement he was “humbled to have the support of so many of my colleagues.”

Internet outages reveal gaps in U.S. broadband infrastructure

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — When vandals sliced a fiber-optic cable in the Arizona desert last month, they did more than time-warp thousands of people back to an era before computers, credit cards or even phones. They exposed a glaring vulnerability in the nation’s Internet infrastructure: no backup systems in many places.

Because Internet service is largely unregulated by the federal government and the states, decisions about network reliability are left to service providers. Industry analysts say these companies generally do not build alternative routes, or redundancies, unless they believe it is worthwhile financially.

The result: While most major U.S. metropolitan areas have backup systems, some smaller cities and many rural areas do not.

“The more rural the location, the more likely that there’s only one road in and out of that location,” said Sean Donelan, a former infrastructure security manager in the U.S. Homeland Security Department who now works for a cybersecurity firm. “If someone manages to cut that fiber, you’ll generally see a one- or two- or three-day outage.”

Despite its own warnings

about such vulnerabilities two decades ago, the federal government has taken no steps to require Internet companies to have backup systems, even as it has provided billions of dollars in subsidies to expand broadband Internet into unserved areas.

“Our first responsibility is to make sure that people actually have service,” said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, co-chairman of President Barack Obama’s newly created Broadband Opportunity Council.

In northern Arizona last month, tens of thousands of residents were without Internet service — some for up to 15 hours — after vandals cut through an underground bundle of fiber-optic cables owned by CenturyLink. ATMs went down, stores couldn’t process credit cards and even 9-1-1 service was lost.

When an underwater fiber-optic cable became wrapped around a big rock and broke in 2013, some residents of Washington state’s San Juan Islands were without Internet and telephone service for 10 days.

Among them was aerospace consultant Mike Loucks, who said he was shocked to find out his home phone, cellphone and Internet

service did not work independently of each other. All went down because they relied on the same cable.

“When I figured out what all had been routed to this cable, it’s a single-point failure thing,” he said. “That’s pretty dumb. Why don’t you guys have a backup cable?”

CenturyLink, the broadband provider in the Arizona and Washington outages, declined to make officials available for an interview about its Internet infrastructure. But spokeswoman Linda Johnson said in an email that the company acts quickly to restore service and “is constantly investing in its local network and strives to deliver new services and build redundancy where possible.”

Companies have been deploying more than 10 million miles of fiber annually in the U.S., increasing the risk of damage from backhoes, trench-diggers and shovels, according to an analysis by a network reliability committee of the Alliance for Telecommunications Industry Solutions. The number of outages on high-capacity fiber-optic lines in the U.S. has more than doubled in recent years, from 221 in 2010 to 487 last year, according to the Federal Communications Commission.

Durbin said he hopes to retain the second-ranking leadership post, known as party whip. Allies of Sen. Patty Murray of Washington said she might also seek that job.

Reid, who came to Congress in 1982, lost his role as Senate majority leader when last fall’s elections swept Republicans into power. He suffered serious eye and facial injuries on New Year’s Day while exercising at his Nevada home.

He typically has won Nevada elections by narrow margins, and Republicans were heavily targeting him in 2016. Both parties now plan all-out bids for his open seat.

In a video statement Friday, Reid said Democrats must retake the Senate majority and “it is inappropriate for me to soak up all those resources” while remaining the caucus leader.

Obama called Reid “a fighter” who pushed for jobs, better health care and a safer environment. He also called the senator a friend, but the two aren’t exactly cozy.

Obama has circumvented Reid to negotiate some tough budget deals with Republicans. In a break with protocol, Reid’s chief of staff publicly suggested Obama’s low popularity hurt Democrats in the 2014 elections.

Reid, however, saves his sharpest barbs for Republicans. After calling

then-President George W. Bush “a liar” and “a loser,” Reid apologized for the “loser” comment but not the “liar.”

Fellow Democrats chose him as their leader for his institutional knowledge, listening skills and tenacity.

Briefly holding a 60-seat, filibuster-proof majority after the 2008 elections, congressional Democrats — led by Rep. Nancy Pelosi in the House, and Reid in the Senate — muscled Obama’s Affordable Care Act to enactment, without a single Republican vote.

Other times, however, Obama and Pelosi worked around Reid. That was largely the case in resolving the 2013 “fiscal cliff” dilemma. When negotiations ground to a halt, raising the possibility of tax hikes on nearly all working Americans, Vice President Joe Biden and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky crafted a compromise with minimal input from Reid.

While never wildly popular with voters, Reid is a canny campaign strategist. Facing a potentially potent GOP opponent in 2000, Reid helped a less experienced tea party-affiliated Republican win the nomination. Then he comfortably beat her in the general election.

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SAGE GROUSE: Population declined 90 percent over century

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were reached last year with nine ranchers in Wyoming. In Nevada this week, Barrick Gold Corp., the world’s largest gold mining company, agreed to establish a conservation bank, which gives it greater flexibility in operations in return for enhancing critical habitat.

Greater sage grouse range across 11 Western states and two Canadian provinces. Oil and gas drilling, wildfires, livestock grazing and other activities have consumed more than half the bird’s habitat over the past century, and their numbers have declined more than 90 percent.

Congress has barred the federal government from spending money on rules to protect the bird. But Fish and Wildlife says it is still bound by court order to reach a decision by September on whether a listing is warranted.

Under terms of the agreement in Oregon, ranchers who take specific steps to protect sage grouse and their habitat will be sheltered from more stringent restrictions if the bird comes under Endangered Species Act protection.

Federal biologists would come to their land to assess what threats were posed to the bird. Protection steps might include changing when and where cattle graze so they don’t infringe on sage grouse breeding, rearing and feeding areas; cutting down juniper trees where birds of prey roost; controlling non-native grasses that spread wild-

fire; putting ramps in water troughs so birds that fall in can climb out; and putting plastic flagging on fences so birds are less likely to fly into them and die.

The U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service has committed \$9 million to sage grouse programs in Oregon, and the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association is working on bills in the state Legislature to generate \$1 million to \$2 million more. Proposals include a \$1 fee on each head of cattle sold, a birdseed tax and tapping lottery funds.

A similar agreement covering about 990 square miles of state lands in southeastern Oregon leased for grazing is expected to be signed next month.

Oregon Cattlemen’s Association executive director Jerome Rosa said many ranchers are signing up in hopes of keeping sage grouse off the endangered species list. But he noted that Oregon only accounts for about 5 percent of sage-grouse habitat in the country.

Dan Morse, conservation director of the Oregon Natural Desert Association, said the success of the agreements will depend on the specific measures federal biologists prescribe to protect sage grouse. Even more important will be the conservation measures the U.S. Bureau of Land Management comes up with for the 23,000 square miles of sage grouse habitat it oversees in Oregon, Morse said. A final plan is due later this spring.

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