

Both parties eager to win Ensign's seat

By Erin Kelly, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON— Sen. John Ensign's decision not to seek re-election surprised few in the nation's capital, where political leaders of both parties have been quietly planning for the possibility for months.

Both Republicans and Democrats believed that Ensign had been so badly weakened by scandal that he could not win a third term. Ensign apparently became convinced of that as well as he looked at the results of recent polls showing him vulnerable to a Republican primary challenge from Rep. Dean Heller, R-Carson City.

"I do not want to put my family, those that I care about, or this state through what would be a very ugly campaign," the Republican senator said Monday in Las Vegas.

Heller and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., issued solemn statements expressing sympathy for their departing colleague.

"This must have been a very difficult decision for John to make," said Heller, who is widely viewed as the leading GOP contender for Ensign's seat despite the fact that he has not yet announced he will run. "He and his family have been through a lot."

Similarly, Reid said, "These have been difficult times for John and his family."

"I wish him the best as he serves out the rest of his term," Reid said.

While Reid and Heller carefully refrained from making any

political comments, their respective political parties clearly have already begun the scramble for Ensign's seat.

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