Md. officials welcome talk of Perez as U.S. secretary of labor

Civil rights lawyer previously served as state labor secretary

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Hispanic and union leaders in Maryland applauded reports Sunday that Thomas E. Perez, a longtime civil rights attorney who led the state's labor department for two years, is poised to be nominated as secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor as early as this week.

Perez, an assistant U.S. attorney general for civil rights, has an extensive political history in Maryland that began more than a decade ago when he became the first Latino to win a seat on the Montgomery County Council. The 51-year-old lives in Takoma Park.

If nominated by President Barack Obama and confirmed by the Senate, he would replace Hilda L. Solis, who resigned in January.

After an aborted run for Maryland attorney general in 2006, Perez served as the state's labor secretary under Gov. Martin O'Malley from 2007 until 2009. If nominated for the federal post, he will have significant support from union leaders and groups eager to see Latinos included in Obama's second-term administration.

"He cares about what he does," said Fred D. Mason Jr., president of the state AFL-CIO. "Tom takes a very serious and deliberate approach to his job."

White House and Department of Justice officials declined to comment on the possible nomination, and Perez did not respond to a request for comment Sunday. The news of his possible appointment was first reported by Bloomberg, which cited unnamed sources.

Despite support from some, his path to the labor position is far from assured.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley said Perez "should face a lot of tough questions" over what the Iowa Republican described as a "shady" deal in which the Justice Department allegedly dropped a lawsuit against the city of St. Paul, Minn., last year in exchange for the city's dismissing separate civil rights litigation against the federal government.

"It's hard to believe that the president would nominate somebody at the heart of a congressional investigation and so deeply involved in a controversial decision," Grassley said in a statement.

Perez ran for Maryland attorney general in 2006 but was kicked off the primary ballot by the Maryland Court of Appeals, which found he lacked the 10 years' legal experience in Maryland required by the state constitution. Perez disagreed with the decision. Douglas F. Gansler won the election that year and remains attorney general.

O'Malley tapped Perez as state labor secretary in 2007, a position the Harvard-educated son of Dominican immigrants used to implement regulations to stem the foreclosure crisis. He also pushed to shift oversight of adult education programs to his agency, a move that led to a turf battle with state education officials.

"Tom Perez was an extraordinary secretary of labor for Marylanders, and we hope that workers across the country will soon be able to benefit from his vision for transformative work," said Gustavo Torres, executive director of CASA de Maryland, where Perez previously served as a board president.

Raised in Buffalo, N.Y., Perez was the only child in his family who did not follow his father into medicine, turning instead to public service. His grandfather was a Dominican ambassador to the United States.
Perez became an attorney in the civil rights division of the Justice Department in the late 1980s, prosecuting several high-profile cases. He also worked on hate crime legislation for Edward M. Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democratic senator who died in 2009.

Perez left the federal government when President George W. Bush, a Republican, took office in 2001. He worked at the University of Maryland law school and was elected to the Montgomery County Council in 2002. He served as the body's president in 2005.

He was, even then, a recognized supporter of labor. George Leventhal, a Democratic member of the council, recalled a 2004 case in which he and Perez were subpoenaed by Comcast for their support of an employee who was fired by the cable company for trying to unionize about 300 employees.

Comcast later dropped the case and reinstated the employee.

"When he believes in something, when he takes something up, he fights for it very aggressively, very forcefully," said Doug Duncan, who served as Montgomery County Executive during Perez's tenure on the council. "He presents his case very well. He will do that for labor."

_Bloomberg News contributed to this article._

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