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COLUMN: Natelson will leave legacy of strong conservative base in Montana

By CHARLES S. JOHNSON Missoulian State Bureau

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Rob Natelson

KURT WILSON/Missoulian

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HELENA - When he moves to Colorado this summer, Rob Natelson will leave behind a much-revitalized Montana conservative movement that he helped foment and lead over much of the past two decades.

The anti-tax increase, lower-government spending and pro-free market philosophies that Natelson has advocated are now firmly embedded in the mainstream of the Montana Republican Party and with most GOP legislators. That wasn't necessarily the case when Natelson began speaking out here.

Natelson, 61, said recently he will resign his job as a law professor at the University of Montana and take a job at the Independence Institute, a Colorado-based think tank that advocates free-market solutions to public policy issues. He has taught at the UM law school since 1987.

Although he's been less active politically more recently to concentrate on his teaching, Natelson over the years has been a prominent political crusader, participant and commentator.

In Montana political circles, there was no middle ground about Natelson. People either admired him and his ideas, or they couldn't stand him and his views.

His departure will be felt deeply in conservative circles in Montana. To them, Natelson was a heroic figure willing to take on many causes on their behalf in attempts to cut taxes and spending. He was a fountain of free-market ideas that conservatives readily embraced. They appreciated his efforts to lead the fight and mix it up politically.

"He's been a guiding light for us for many years and a personal and very cherished friend," said former Rep. Roger Koopman, R-Bozeman. "We are going to miss him. This opportunity just gives him an opportunity to do a lot more to service his country."

Natelson will not be missed by those who disagreed with him. He infuriated his critics. The head of the state teachers' union once blasted Natelson as a demagogue out to destroy government. As a professor, Natelson drew barbs for opposing the 6-mill university levy and helping block tax hikes that could have improved university system funding.

"I have to give him credit for being a fierce advocate for what he believed in, no matter how much I disagreed with it," said former state Sen. Jim Elliott, D-Trout Creek, who tangled often with Natelson in their rival op-ed columns.

Regardless of what people think of him, Natelson unquestionably has left his mark on Montana.

He first surfaced as a statewide public figure in 1993 over the legislative referendum on Republican Gov. Marc Racicot's sales tax proposal. As historic sales tax foes such as unions and senior groups fought it from the left, Natelson led the charge against it from the right. Voters buried the sales tax by 3-to-1.

Next, Natelson turned his sights onto the income tax increase the 1993 Legislature enacted as a backup plan in case voters rejected the sales tax. Natelson spearheaded the citizen effort that gathered 100,000 signatures to suspend the \$62 million, two-year tax increase and force a vote on it. Montanans crushed that tax hike by 3-to-1 in 1994.

Natelson led the 1998 effort behind Constitutional Initiative 75, which Montanans narrowly passed, 51 percent to 49 percent, to require voters to approve most state and local tax and fee increases. The next year, the Montana Supreme Court unanimously threw out the measure as unconstitutional.

Natelson immediately condemned the ruling as "one of the most arrogant decisions I have ever read," an attack that drew criticism from a number of his fellow law school professors.

He played key roles in founding a pair of influential political organizations known as Montanans for Better Government and Montana Conservatives.

Natelson twice failed in bids for the Republican nomination for governor, losing to Racicot, the incumbent, by 76 percent to 24 percent in 1996 and to the eventual governor, Judy Martz, by 57 percent to 43 percent, in 2000.

Along the way, Natelson cranked out dozens, if not hundreds, of op-ed articles on public policy issues for Montana newspapers. He had his own statewide radio talk show and spoke to groups throughout the state. All the while, he was teaching law and writing a number of scholarly law review articles.

Some thought Natelson as a state employee and professor should have been muzzled when he spoke out against what he considered to be excessive state spending and taxes. He wasn't silenced, nor should he have been. After all, a number of UM professors on the other side of the political spectrum historically have spoken out politically on environmental and other issues over the years.

As a reporter, I've always believed that the more diverse ideas we have percolating up in our democracy from all kinds of sources, the better off we all are. Our political system works best if we have people from all perspectives offering up their best ideas and solutions for the people and our leaders to evaluate, debate and ultimately judge.

That was one of Natelson's major contributions in Montana, regardless of what any of us may have thought of his ideas.

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