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GOP's Fong withdraws, will stay active

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Cedar Rapids Republican Christian Fong remains a rising political star despite announcing Tuesday he was giving up his 2010 campaign for governor, supporters said.

Fong attributed the decision to leave the race to difficulty he had raising campaign contributions in recent months. But he promised to remain involved politically and didn't rule out running again for governor.

"I wouldn't have started if I didn't think I could win. But, at 32, this is just round one," Fong said. "I'm not closing any doors."

Fong had impressed activists and donors in the early months of his campaign last summer with his youth and life story. However, The Des Moines Register's Iowa Poll showed few Iowans knew much about him.

The son of a Chinese immigrant father, Fong graduated from college at 16 and went on to earn a master's degree in business administration from Dartmouth.

Iowa Republicans have fought internally this year about whether to return to conservative principles or expand the party base by reaching out to moderates.

Fong's candidacy was seen as potentially unifying for Iowa Republicans, having attracted top activists within the Iowa GOP's social and fiscal wings.

Marlys Popma, one of the state's leading social conservative organizers, was Fong's campaign manager. Ed Failor, president of the influential anti-tax group Iowans for Tax Relief, endorsed Fong in part because of his proposal to phase out Iowa's income tax.

But Fong, international markets manager for Aegon Corp., said his fundraising, particularly from the Des Moines area, had fallen short of his goals.

Former Gov. Terry Branstad's entry into the 2010 Republican field in October stalled fundraising for many of the GOP prospects. Fong said he felt it was wrong to continue asking donors for money.

The Register's Iowa Poll last month showed Branstad leading Gov. Chet Culver, a first-term Democrat, in a hypothetical match-up, 57 percent to 34 percent. The same poll showed 83 percent of likely voters did not know enough about Fong to say whether they viewed him favorably or unfavorably.

Only 14 percent were unsure about Branstad.

"It's disingenuous to ask donors to put money into a campaign when I know that, come Jan. 20, I will not be able to stand up to the scrutiny that is rightly put on every campaign to prove their viability," Fong said.

Campaign finance disclosure reports for 2009 fundraising are due Jan. 19.

Fong said he would not rule out running for lieutenant governor, but said he did not expect any of the remaining candidates to ask him to join them on the ticket. He also said he did not expect to endorse any of his former primary rivals before the June primary election.

Fong's profile, positions and spirited campaign effort this year position him well for the future.

"He's the face of the future of the party," said Failor. "I believe Christian Fong will be governor of this state someday."
