

Mike Sullivan and Danny Williams were ambitious young lawmakers once. Now they want the chance to be elder statesmen. Sullivan, 81, and Williams, who turns 71 on Friday, each left the Oklahoma House of Representatives decades ago, but they hope to return after the Nov. 3 general election. Sullivan, a Poteau attorney, is a particularly interesting case. A half-century ago he was a rapidly rising star in the House, just a few notches below then-Speaker Rex Privett. At 32, with term limits still decades away, Sullivan seemed destined for big things. Then he carried a bill that raised oil and gas taxes. In 1971, newly elected Gov. David Hall introduced what was, at the time, an aggressive tax program that included the first oil and gas tax increase in more than 35 years. The new revenue was to go to education. Sullivan was the House author. After much negotiation, the tax package was pared from close to \$40 million to just over \$20 million. The gross production tax rate went from 5% to 7% — still the state's base rate. Oil and gas producers protested the tax hike would put them out of business or run them out of the state. The president of Phillips Petroleum said his industry could not "stand any more taxation in Oklahoma and still remain healthy." Some maintain the bill was the real impetus for the corruption probe that led to Hall's political downfall and 1975 conviction on bribery and extortion charges. Sullivan certainly attributes the sudden end of his career to it. "They spent \$100,000 to beat me," Sullivan said recently, referring to oil and gas interests. That summer it was reported Sullivan and several other representatives who supported the tax increase had gone to Acapulco courtesy of a lobbyist. Sullivan and the others admitted going on the trip but said it was at their own expense. There doesn't seem to have been any proof otherwise, but the damage was done. Sullivan, who according to news reports had a chance of being the next speaker of the House, was beaten in the 1972 Democratic primary. Sullivan later served two terms as a district attorney and 14 years on

the local school board. He was also on the Oklahoma Ethics Commission for a while. Now he wants to tie up some loose ends in the House. “I want to do some things that are not getting done,” Sullivan said. “The thing I most want to do is raise student testing scores. And I want to fix the roads. I’ve got a plan to help out the county commissioners.” In practice, Sullivan has a steep hill to climb. House District 3, which is mostly LeFlore County, has gone from solid Democrat to solid Republican, and Sullivan’s GOP opponent is another former state representative, Rick West. West served one term before leaving in 2018 for family reasons. An arch conservative, West defeated incumbent Lundy Kiger in the primary. He says he wants back in office because he’s concerned about overregulation of agriculture, and poultry in particular, and because Kiger voted for a bill that would have required HIV and sex education curriculum be approved “by Oklahoma City” and not local school boards. And he’s against taxes. “Everybody I talk to says, ‘Don’t raise my taxes,’” West said. Danny Williams seems to have a better chance than Sullivan of returning to the Legislature. A Seminole businessman who served three terms in the House as a Democrat from 1989-1995, Williams switched to the Republican Party “seven or eight years ago.” He would seem to be the favorite on Nov. 3 against Democrat Yasmina Choate. “I’ve always been pro-life. I’ve always been pro-gun,” he said. Unlike Sullivan, Williams left the Legislature “though not state government” voluntarily. With incumbent Gov. David Walters mired in a personal financial scandal, Williams took the leap and ran for the 1994 Democratic gubernatorial nomination. He finished third in a four-way primary. “As I look back over my life, there are probably things I could have used better wisdom,” Williams replied when asked if he regretted the decision to run for governor. “But as far as regretting it, no. I always regretted I didn’t win. But I don’t regret (running). I learned some things in that process. I learned some things about the state of Oklahoma.” Since 2000, Williams has owned

a telecommunications business that specializes in rural and small-town internet. As a legislator 30 years ago, he was involved in putting together OneNet, the state's educational internet system; if he returns, he'd like to work on further utilization of the network. "The time is right," he said when asked why, after more than a quarter-century, he wants back in the saddle. "I can make a difference."

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