

APNewsBreak: Montana House hopeful blames tax woes on health

By **BOBBY CAINA CALVAN**
Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. (March 21, 2017) — Montana filed three tax liens to collect about \$15,000 in back taxes against the Democrat running for the state's only congressional seat, which the political newcomer blamed on health problems that nearly led to his financial ruin.

Popular musician Rob Quist and Republican candidate Greg Gianforte are locked in a heated race to fill the remainder of the term for Ryan Zinke, who stepped down to join President Donald Trump Cabinet as Interior secretary. A Democrat has not held Montana's U.S. House seat in 20 years.

A May 25 special election is drawing outside attention, with a Republican political action committee pledging to spend \$700,000 to support Gianforte, a technology entrepreneur who faced a tax lien of his own more than 20 years ago that emerged last fall in his failed bid to unseat Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock.

The liens against Quist and his wife, Bonni, were issued in 2015 and cover the 2007, 2011 and 2012 tax years, according to documents

obtained by The Associated Press. He settled the debt with the Department of Revenue last May.

In an interview Monday, Quist blamed a history of medical issues dating back two decades and costing tens of thousands of dollars in expenses. It started with a botched gallbladder surgery, which led to other related medical problems, he said.

"It's not a case of me not being able to manage my finances. I was doing just fine until I had this health issue," Quist said.

"Quite frankly, this is the kind of stuff that happens to everyday Montanans," he said, pledging to release his income taxes to the AP.

In response to queries about the liens against Quist, Democratic operatives pointed to a \$3,600 tax lien issued in 1993 in New Jersey against Gianforte.

Gianforte spokesman Shane Scanlon said that debt was paid about three months later. He declined to comment on Quist's financial issues.

Quist has previously alluded to his personal travails with the health care system and having to do without adequate insurance, which has become a central talking point in his bid for Congress.

During his address at the Montana Democratic Party's annual dinner Saturday, he said he understood "personally what it's like to worry about mounting health care bills."

Quist said he sought to address his family's financial tailspin by trying to sell a portion of his ranch, but a dispute with a bank blocked the sale. Quist said he recently sued the bank and will use a pending settlement to fend off a collection agency seeking about \$10,000 because of a defaulted bank loan.

Quist became an immediate Democratic front-runner when former Gov. Brian Schweitzer endorsed him. Democrats seemed drawn to Quist's persona as a soft-spoken political outsider.

But some rank-and-file party members said they knew little about Quist, and some prominent Democrats have privately grouched that Quist had not been properly vetted.

Quist said he was expecting his financial woes to come to light but did not expect them to become a central issue in the campaign.

"There is not anybody who's not going to have something in their background that people aren't going to cast dispersions on," he said.

