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Reagan Edges Closer

By George Murphy

The chances that former Governor Ronald Reagan will take on President Ford in next year's Republican primaries grew stronger yesterday.

This morning Reagan supporters are expected to announce in Concord, N.H., formation of a statewide committee to promote Reagan's candidacy in the nation's first primary, March 2.

New Hampshire's Governor Meldrin Thompson had said earlier he would run as a surrogate in his state if the former California governor did not enter the race.

But recent events seem to have added impetus to the Reagan drive.

Reagan was warmly received in Portland last week at the Western States Republican Conference. The 15 states represented add up to more than 20 per cent of the delegate vote at next year's Republican national convention.

And at about the same time Reagan was addressing the Portland meeting, three of the seven top officers of the national Young Republicans said they were backing Reagan against Mr. Ford.

Reagan, they said, can "revitalize" the GOP.

But while all this was happening, Reagan muddied the waters a bit yesterday in Pennsylvania.

For months, he has steadfastly maintained he was "not interested" in a second spot on Mr. Ford's ticket.

But in Martinsburg, Pa., in response to a question, he said:

"I never have liked that second job, but if the party convinced me that it's necessary, then it's like a call to duty.

"But I would not seek that nomination."

Then he added: "On the other hand, you don't make a Sherman-like statement, because what if you were in the position and the circumstances were such your party members could convince you that you could contribute, you could make a contribution to the good not only of the party, but the country.

"Well, then, it's like a call to duty."

In New Hampshire today, it was expected that former Governor Hugh Gregg would be named chairman of the statewide committee for Reagan for President.