There are currently three openly gay legislators in Congress, but the mayor of Palm Springs, Calif., is seeking to boost that number to four.

Mayor Steve Pougnet is so far running unopposed in June’s Democratic primary, but is looking to unseat incumbent Rep. Mary Bono Mack (R), who’s represented California’s 45th District in the House for more than 10 years, in next fall’s election.

Pougnet, 46, has served as the mayor of Palm Springs since 2007 and sat on City Council for four years prior to his election.

If elected, Pougnet would become the first married gay Congressmember and the first out parent in Congress; he married his partner of 18 years, Christopher Green, last year and the couple is raising 3-year-old adopted twins, Julia and Beckham.

Pougnet, formerly a university executive in Colorado and Michigan, was elected to City Council from a pool of nine potential candidates in 2003 after having lived in the area for just two years.

“I’ve always had the ability to bring people together,” he said. “Before I came to City Council here in Palm Springs, I saw that they didn’t really have a strategy; they were very reactionary to issues, but had no real strategic plan. I love putting the pieces of a puzzle together and I have the ability to lead, so I thought that my talents could be well served here in Palm Springs in the political environment.”

Pougnet, who earned a bachelor’s degree in business from Michigan State University,
said he’s always been committed to being out in the workplace and, throughout his career, employed a policy that his supervisor and any employees he managed would know his orientation.

“I wanted to make sure that people knew who I was, completely,” he said. “And it’s always been received extremely well. I’ve seen that it’s really how you interact with people that they’re going to ultimately judge you on.”

Pougnet was elected alongside two other openly gay councilmembers in 2003, and another was appointed to the body, making the city the largest in the nation to be governed by an LGBT majority.

“I know that for a very, very brief time, some folks thought there was this gay takeover of the city and were thinking, ‘Here comes the gay agenda.’ But I was thinking, ‘Well, I don’t keep a gay agenda in my back pocket.’” he said. “I tried to make it clear that I was representing the entire population of the city of Palm Springs. To me, it’s always been very important to communicate with everybody. Some issues are universal to everyone.”

Pougnet won 70 percent of the vote in the 2007 mayoral election and said that one of the most integral periods of his mayoral career came last summer, when he was able to perform 118 same-sex marriages when it was legally allowable in California, the largest number of gay weddings performed by a mayor in the state.

“Each and every one was very, very emotional,” Pougnet said. “You’ve got folks who’ve loved one another for so many years — one couple had been together for 52 years.”

Pougnet and Green married in September, about a month-and-a-half before voters approved Proposition 8, which overturned the state’s same-sex marriage law.

Pougnet said he first started considering moving up the political ladder shortly after the election, when California’s 45th was one of eight Republican-led districts in the state that went to President Obama.

While the majority of voters in the 45th District are Republican, the margin of difference between Republicans and Democrats has shrunk from nearly 10 percentage points to about 4 in the past two years.

Andrew Stone, Western press secretary at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said the 45th District is one of several Republican-controlled districts in
the state that his agency is focusing on for next year’s election.

“The 45th District is changing dramatically,” Stone said. “We’ve seen voter registration changing, we’ve seen demographics changing and Mary Bono Mack is just out of touch with her district.”

Stone noted that, as mayor, Pougnet helped create more than 1,000 jobs in Palm Springs through his hotel renovation and creation initiatives and worked to expand economic opportunities through sustainability projects.

If elected to Congress, Pougnet said he will continue to strive for economic gains through renewable-energy initiatives and will support efforts to continue healthcare reform. Pougnet said he will be a strong advocate for a variety of pro-LGBT bills, such as legislation to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” for which he’s posted a petition on his Web site and met with the bill’s prime sponsor, Rep. Patrick Murphy (D-Pa.).

Jordan Marks, Pougnet’s campaign manager and a Philadelphia native, said that the mayor’s election to Congress could help further the public’s consciousness toward marriage equality.

“There’s something very special I think in electing a gay dad to Congress,” Marks said. “I think it legitimizes marriage equality in a way we weren’t able to do in Maine or in California. If you elect a gay dad to Congress, you’re showing that this person represents a real segment of the population. We’ve had gay people elected before, but electing someone who’s married with kids I think changes the ballgame.”

Bono Mack opposes marriage equality and favors civil unions, but has voted twice against a bill to ban same-sex marriage in the U.S. Constitution. In 1999, however, she voted in favor of legislation to prohibit same-sex adoption in Washington, D.C., which Pougnet called “unconscionable.”

Bono Mack succeeded her husband Sonny Bono, who also previously served as mayor of Palm Springs, in Congress after his 1998 death.

Even though the election is nearly a year out, Pougnet has already raised more than $500,000 — roughly the same amount that Bono Mack’s most recent Democratic challenger Julie Bornstein had accumulated throughout her entire campaign.

Pougnet has been endorsed by The Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund and has received support from such legislators as Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and out Reps. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and Jared Polis (D-Colo.).
“This is going to be intense,” Pougnet said, “and it’s going to be tough, but I think this will be the race to watch for in the LGBT community.”

*Jen Colletta can be reached at jen@epgn.com.*

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