



The Quiet Campaign for Science Gavel

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By Jennifer Yachnin,
Roll Call Staff

Even while House Administration Chairman Vernon Ehlers (R) stocks top staff positions on the panel, the Michigan lawmaker still won't say whether he's preparing for a long-term stay in the chairman's seat.

"I'm not making any judgments," Ehlers said in a recent interview. "I was given a job to do. I want to do that the best I can."

Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) tapped Ehlers to take control of the committee in January after the previous chairman, Rep. Bob Ney (R-Ohio), forfeited the post under pressure from Republican leadership over his alleged ties to former GOP lobbyist Jack Abramoff, the central figure in an ongoing corruption probe.

In the months since, the committee staff has undergone significant changes, as Ehlers has installed his own top staff, including Chief of Staff William Plaster, and even created a new communications director post to coordinate outreach to other House Members.

But asked to discuss his own ambitions to continue on at the committee helm, Ehlers demurs.

"We'll see," the 72-year old lawmaker said, then noted the pending November elections. "We have an election to get through first."

Even if Ehlers were to seek a claim to the House Administration gavel, however, he could face a challenge from Ney, who has said that his departure from the committee is temporary.

"I'm just waiting," Ney said in a recent interview. The Ohio lawmaker, who is currently under investigation by the Justice Department, has repeatedly proclaimed his innocence in the matter.

Ney added that the final decision rests with the Speaker, but he hopes to have a conversation about the post in the future.

"I'll take it one step at a time," Ney said.

While the House ethics committee voted last week to begin an investigation into Ney's activities, only the federal investigation is expected to influence when he could return to his former post, according to a senior GOP aide.

"The current position is Congressman Ney has stepped aside until his name is clear," the aide said.

Although Ehlers has declined to discuss his interest in becoming the top Republican at the Science Committee — one of at least 10 House panels that will see a change in GOP leadership in the 110th Congress — since taking over the House Administration panel, he acknowledged in early May that it

remains his top choice of gavels.

"Between House Administration and Science, yes," he said.

Ehlers, a research physicist, also is quick to point to his own background when discussing the Science post: "That committee has not been chaired by a scientist in many years."

But Ehlers is not alone in the competition for the Science Committee gavel, now held by Rep. Sherwood Boehlert (R-N.Y.), who will retire at the end of the 109th Congress.

Among the candidates are Rep. Ralph Hall (R-Texas), a former Democrat and the panel's senior member overall, who is widely believed to have the inside track to be the panel's next leader.

"The heir apparent is likely to be Ralph Hall," Boehlert said Friday, citing Hall's "qualifications, temperament and experience."

"My general feeling ... is that you should generally adhere to seniority, unless it is clear for one reason or another that the most senior member is not determined to be up to the job," the New York lawmaker added, while noting that he does not serve on the Republican House Steering Committee, which selects chairman. Those selections must also be approved by the full GOP Conference.

The Texas lawmaker, who has acknowledged his interest in the post, said Thursday that he has reached out to leadership on the matter.

While some Members have raised questions about Hall's age and whether the 83-year-old could serve a full six years at the panel's helm — House Republican instituted six-year term limits for chairman and ranking members in 1995 — he said: "I'm in good shape health wise."

But Hall could also face potential questions over his seniority. Although he has served on the panel for 26 years, the Texan only became a Republican in 2004, having served as a Democrat since his election in 1980.

When Hall switched parties in the middle of the 108th Congress, however, GOP leaders promised his seniority, including several years as the ranking member on the Science panel, would be honored.

Boehlert said he doubted the change would be used against Hall.

Even Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.), who is contending with Hall for the seat, offered praise for the Texan.

"Ralph has got tremendous respect from every Member including myself," Rohrabacher said, and later added: "But I would hope when the smoke clears, I'm the chairman."

While the Californian said he has likewise reached out to House leaders, he said he will not "campaign" for the seat, nor bash his fellow lawmakers in the process.

"I'd like to have a chance to be chairman not because of some ego factor, but because I have some tremendous technological initiatives" to advance in the House, he said.

Although several Members rank ahead of Rohrabacher, as well as Ehlers, those lawmakers have expressed interest in other areas.

Among them, Reps. Lamar Smith (R-Texas) and Curt Weldon (R-Pa.) are focused on future chairmanships at the Judiciary and Armed Services panels, respectively, while Rep. Ken Calvert (R-Calif.), who ranks behind Rohrabacher, is expected to win a seat on the Appropriations panel later this year.

In addition, Rep. Bob Inglis (R-S.C.) said he also would like to be considered. Although he ranks well-down the roster in seniority, Inglis chairs the subcommittee on research.

"I've had conversations with the Speaker about a future on the committee," Inglis said in a recent interview.

But Inglis — whom Boehlert referred to as a "rising star" on the panel — added that he will defer to Ehlers, should the Michigan lawmaker actively seek the chairmanship.

"I've had very specific conversations with Vern Ehlers, saying that if he wants to come back to Science to chair the committee, I will clearly defer to you, because you are a friend, and have an excellent background and capabilities, and tremendous enthusiasm."

Referring to the numerous candidates to replace him, Boehlert said: "You can't serve on a committee without ambitions to go to the top." He later added: "We are not short on talent on the Science Committee."