

La. clout in Congress being cut

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Last week's decision by U.S. Rep. Richard Baker to leave Congress sent an onerous message from Washington to Baton Rouge - and to newly inaugurated Gov. Bobby Jindal.

The message: Here is the decimated Louisiana congressional delegation you have to work with.

Baker, a Baton Rouge Republican, takes with him 22 years of House experience. With Jindal's resignation from Congress and the decision by U.S. Rep. Jim McCrery, R-Shreveport, to step down in November, Louisiana will lose more than half of its current seniority - 44 out of 87 total years.

That seniority could further be eroded by 18 years if U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans, is convicted of public corruption charges. Jefferson has pleaded innocent to 16 counts, including bribery, conspiracy, racketeering and money laundering. His trial is scheduled for Feb. 25.

The loss of Louisiana veterans on key

congressional committees is another concern.

When former U.S. Rep. Billy Tauzin, R-Chackbay, retired in 2004, he was chairman of the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee. When former U.S. Rep. Bob Livingston, R-Metairie, resigned in 1998, he was chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee.

Former U.S. Sen. J. Bennett Johnston retired in 1997, having once been chairman of the Senate Energy Committee. McCrery is ranking Republican on the House Ways and Means Committee, the panel that writes the nation's tax laws. Baker was a veteran on the House Financial Services Committee.

Elliot Stonecipher, a Shreveport political consultant, said Louisianians in such key posts allowed them to steer more federal funding to the state.

"To me, committee assignments are the best expression of seniority," Stonecipher said. "We'll go from (having) ranking members on Ways and Means and Financial Services to whoever takes their place having lesser committee assignments."

If Jefferson is convicted, the Louisiana man of the House will be U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman - elected only six years ago.

"The years that Baker and McCrery spent, that's how long it takes to get key committee assignments," Stonecipher said. "It takes 20 years."

The departure situation could boost the re-election chances of U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La. Landrieu serves on the Senate Appropriations Committee and the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee and chairs the disaster recovery subcommittee with oversight of hurricane recovery matters.

If Jefferson is convicted, Landrieu, with 11 years, will be the longest-serving member of the nine-member Louisiana delegation. Landrieu sent a campaign message out to supporters within a day of Baker's announcement last week.

"This sudden and gigantic loss of Louisiana's congressional seniority greatly strengthens the case for why it's so important this year to re-elect Louisiana's senior senator," the message said.

Louisiana House members aren't ready to scream that the political sky is falling just yet.

Alexander holds a post on the Appropriations Committee. U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, sits on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee that Baker also sat on.

U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., holds a spot on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee that handled the major Water Resource Development Act that brought the authorization of \$7 billion for coastal-restoration, hurricane-protection and flood-control projects to the state.

The biggest winner in the House vacuum may be U.S. Rep. Charles "Charlie" Melancon, D-Napoleonville. Melancon, who sits on the energy committee, chastised House leadership last year for not putting hurricane-recovery issues at the forefront of the new Congress.

The move helped in legislation to waive the 10 percent federal match that the state was required to put up, saving Louisiana \$1 billion.

"So far, the leadership gets it," Melancon said. "Let's hope that window doesn't close."

Hope may be the only thing that the delegation holds. ***Alexander said that members can do nothing about the huge loss to state clout, except to do their best to ensure that federal funding continues to flow to Louisiana.***

"It may be awhile before somebody builds enough time to chair a committee," Alexander said. "But it will happen someday."