

Wiser in Washington

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In Congress, longevity means power.

In the long-accepted tradition of seniority, the most powerful committee assignments go to those with staying power.

With the loss of Reps. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans, already weakened by scandal, and Jim McCrery, R-Shreveport, the state's clout in the halls of Congress has dipped.

But with the shake-up of the Republican Party this past November, one House of Representatives member stands to move faster than he would otherwise. That's our own Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman.

First elected to the House in 2002 as a Democrat, he switched parties in 2004 to become a member of the majority Republicans, winning a seat on the Appropriations Committee. At

the time, Alexander faced criticism for the switch, but in time Alexander has convinced the district's voters, a conservative bunch, that the Republican ideals better suited his personal philosophy.

At age 62, and now elected to his fourth term, Alexander is a considerably wiser and experienced representative. He has grown in stature and has a better understanding how to succeed in Washington, especially important as the Democrats extend their majority in the coming Congress and in Alexander's role as the senior member of the Louisiana House delegation.

Alexander knows how to reach across the aisle. His bipartisan approach has been especially important in the recent trying years for Louisiana, working with other Louisiana congressmen in both parties to rally support for hurricane-stricken southern Louisiana.

His seniority in the upcoming Congress has allowed Alexander to move up eight seats in the all-important Appropriations Committee, giving him greater influence. That's a huge step up, reflecting the drubbing Republicans took in November.

Alexander's success comes in spite of his aversion to Washington. The congressman spends many hours in his 5th District, spending each weekend at home in Quitman. Staying close to the people, Alexander has proven to be a hard-working representative who understands the needs and concerns of his constituency.

He has been exceptionally successful in bringing federal dollars home. Through his seat on Appropriations, Alexander has arranged for money to help build a parking garage at the University of Louisiana at Monroe, \$400,000 to help build a new terminal at Monroe Regional Airport, \$1.6 million for

Ouachita River levees and assistance in establishing the Greater Ouachita Port. He sees such projects as an integral part of his job, bristles at the criticism of such projects as pork and argues that it is the federal government's way of returning the taxes generated in northeastern Louisiana.

But with only six years under his belt, Alexander is still a relative youngster among his colleagues in the House. That's why it would behoove the other Louisiana House members to rally around Alexander and emulate him. His is a solid model for a congressman, with indications of many more years of service to come. If that happens, Alexander's influence — and that of Louisiana — will only grow.

Together, the delegation, both Democrats and Republicans, can exert greater influence for Louisiana than it would otherwise enjoy.