

Conference with the Congressman

Editor's note: During a Wednesday teleconference, The News Star's editorial board questioned 5th District U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander on a broad range of issues likely to be addressed by this year's Congress. Following is a summary of the conference:

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The News Star: Congressman Alexander, the Democrats will take control of Congress this week. What changes do you expect to see?

Congressman Rodney Alexander: I don't know for sure because they haven't handed me an agenda yet. There are some things I have heard that they will propose. For example, they want lobbyist reform. They want to ban lobbyists from taking House and Senate members on trips. That's OK with me. I don't take trips or gifts, anyway. I hear they want to make changes to border provisions that they voted for just one month ago.

TNS: What events transpired that allowed you to retain your seat on the Appropriations Committee?

Alexander: I guess the good Lord knew that the 5th District, as poor as it is, needed somebody on Appropriations.

TNS: You've been outspoken in your opposition to the Democrats' proposed ban on Congressional earmarks. Why?

Alexander: Why should some bureaucrat that works for a government agency or the president determine which project in the 5th Congressional District is needed? They don't know this district. It's a sham for the Democrats to say that eliminating earmarks would balance the budget in one year.

TNS: Do you think the district's current earmarked projects would survive scrutiny by federal agencies?

Alexander: Some would be funded. But representatives with years of experience up here have the clout to influence those bureaucrats to steer projects to their districts.

TNS: Do you think there will be some compromise on the issue?

Alexander: Yes. They want our names to be attached to the earmarks. That's fine with me. But I don't think earmarks will go away completely.

TNS: How would you characterize your relationship with the new Democratic leadership? Are they still upset over your party switch?

Alexander: We are all grown people up here who can get along. There are other members of Congress who have switched parties. But in my case, the poll numbers said I

could be re-elected as a Democrat. I switched parties because I wanted to. Some will still have their stinger out, but I'm going by faith that the system will work.

TNS: How do you think hurricane relief will fare under the Democrats?

Alexander: I think there will be more support for compensation for our state on the Democrats' side. The areas affected tend to be stronger for their party. Whether the aid will move along more quickly, I don't know. The state of Louisiana is the problem now. The relief is there. It's just not being used.

TNS: What's your stand on the war in Iraq now?

Alexander: I have supported funding for the war and I have supported President Bush. I don't think we had enough troops there to begin with. We sure don't need to stick with the present agenda; we don't need to stay the course. Our course needs to change as the enemy changes. The president has been more stubborn than he ought to be. The war is a complicated issue and I think the military ought to have more say in the policy.

TNS: What do you think about talk from the Democrats about eliminating subsidies to big oil companies?

Alexander: Our understanding is that they will do away with those and some of them will come back with windfall tax proposals. I think we need to have incentives for production. We have to be very careful not to kill incentives for people to get out and work.

TNS: The U.S. Department of Education gave Louisiana an F in terms of college affordability. Will you support a proposal to cut interest rates on subsidized loans to students and parents?

Alexander: Yes, I would support that. I don't understand why we have to charge any interest at all. We should provide the funds, and if it's paid back on time, it should be interest free. Why should the federal government make money off these loans?

TNS: This district has the largest variety of agricultural row crops in the nation, so the 2007 Farm Bill holds much interest in our region.

Alexander: I'm not so optimistic for the farm program with the Democrats in charge. I don't know how it will affect our area. That's why I've requested a seat on the agricultural subcommittee of Appropriations. The current Farm Bill has worked well.

Lending institutions have accepted it and have been willing to loan money based on it.

Now, it's hard to know whether to loan money or borrow money until the issues are resolved.

Of course, there will be differences about which commodities will be protected. I've invited Agriculture Committee Chairman Colin Peterson (D-Minn.) to come to the Ag Expo in Monroe this month (Jan. 19-20). But since (House Speaker Nancy) Pelosi says we are going to work on Friday's now, I don't know if he's going to make it. We have gotten behind third world countries in oil production. We don't need to be begging for food along with oil.