

Funding load falls on shoulders of Rodney Alexander

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By Greg Hilburn

U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander was already a magnet for funding requests as the lone Louisiana member of the House on the Appropriations Committee, but his responsibilities have intensified with the departures of colleagues Richard Baker and Bobby Jindal from Congress.

Baker's retirement and Jindal's ascension to governor have temporarily left Louisiana's 6th District and 1st District with empty seats, leaving the 5th District's Alexander to pick up the slack.

"It's extra hectic, but if I don't help other districts, it's eventually going to impact the 5th District," said Alexander, R-Quitman. "If the Port of New Orleans is weakened, then the opportunities for the (Greater Ouachita Port) are going to diminish."

Though staffs remain in the districts with vacant seats to handle constituent services, only a member of the House

can submit project requests — and there are plenty of them.

"There's a ton (of requests) — more than 500," said Jack Thompson, Alexander's legislative director.

And there will be more.

With the pending retirement of 4th District U.S. Rep. Jim McCrery, R-Shreveport, later this year, Alexander will become the dean of the state's Republican delegation.

Only 2nd District U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans, whose effectiveness has been weakened by a federal indictment, will have more seniority in the House following McCrery's retirement.

"We need a go-to person in the House, and Congressman Alexander has become that," said Gary LaGrange, president and chief executive of the Port of New Orleans. "He's been effective for the whole state — with or without the empty seats."

Joel Dupre' of Southern Scrap Recycling, which has operations along the Gulf Coast from Lake Charles to Tampa, but none in the 5th District, said

Alexander "has probably been more receptive and perceptive than anybody else in the delegation to the needs of waterways infrastructure. He knows that what is good for the coast is good for all of Louisiana," he said.

Alexander is also working closely with Louisiana's two U.S. senators, Democrat Mary Landrieu and Republican David Vitter, to secure funding for the state.

Though Landrieu called Alexander a coward when he switched parties in 2004, the two have since developed a cozy relationship, especially as they coordinate funding for Louisiana from their respective seats on the Senate and House Appropriations committees.

"There was initial anger and disappointment (over the party switch), but that has abated and we're working well together," Landrieu said. "Rodney has most certainly met the Louisiana tradition of working across party lines for the good of the state. He's grown right into that role, and he's well liked and well respected."

"I would say that Rodney's leadership

role started with his seat on Appropriations, but it has grown and expanded with the departure of (Baker and Jindal) and eventually (McCrery)," Vitter said. "He's never hesitated in supporting the needs of other parts of the state."

Alexander has always defended the use of earmarks, securing funding for specific local projects, and has even taken pride in being named one of Congress's pork project kings by various government watchdog groups.

"We have one of the poorest districts in the nation," he said. "I'm not ashamed of one earmark that I've been able to get, whether it be for the Ouachita Port, the Monroe Airport, our universities or the Port of New Orleans.

"Anytime we can do what's necessary to secure funds, we're going to do so. I know there are some people who want bureaucrats to decide funding on some kind of priority system, but how is some agency bureaucrat going to know the needs better than the person who represents that area? That hasn't worked very well for us in the past."