

Alexander now state's leader in House

Senior member moves up ranks of appropriations committee

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Fifth District U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander was asked what it meant to become the dean of Louisiana's House delegation after longtime 2nd District Rep. William Jefferson's loss to Republican Joseph Cao last week.

"Well, the first piece of advice I gave to my new Louisiana colleague wasn't taken, so it may not mean much," said Alexander, R-Quitman, referring to a talk he had with Cao after he beat beleaguered Democrat Jefferson, a Lake Providence native.

"I told (Cao) that he should spend as much time as he could at home, and the next day I read where he's going to pull his children out of school and move the family to Washington immediately," Alexander said, laughing.

Alexander, 62, still returns to his rural Jackson Parish home every weekend, but he has quickly risen on the seniority ladder both in Louisiana and Washington.

"I don't like Washington," he said. "People who live in Washington begin to believe that the Washington scene is reality. They can begin to lose contact with the people they represent and why they're here."

But for someone who prefers Quitman to Washington, Alexander has become a master at maneuvering his way through the system in just six years.

Alexander switched parties in 2004, which allowed him to land a coveted seat on the Appropriations Committee. He moved up eight slots on the committee in the most recent election cycle.

"Seniority is everything in the House," said John Sutherlin,

a University of Louisiana at Monroe political scientist. "There's no doubt that Rodney is positioned to represent Louisiana strongly during the next couple of years."

Gov. Bobby Jindal said the entire state will lean on Alexander for leadership in the House.

"Rodney's a terrific ally in advocating for Louisiana's needs — from hurricane recovery assistance to support for expanding our critical transportation infrastructure," said Jindal, who served with Alexander in Congress before winning the governor's race last fall.

"I know his many years of experience will continue to serve our state well, and he will be an outstanding mentor and friend for new members of our delegation," Jindal said.

Sutherlin said part of Alexander's effectiveness comes because of a bipartisan reputa-

tion he developed as a member of the Louisiana Legislature and carried with him to Congress.

"He's well known for his ability to work across party lines, especially among his colleagues in Louisiana," Sutherlin said. "That, coupled with his seniority, makes him ideal to lead the delegation."

Alexander said he believes his effectiveness is enhanced because he doesn't try to be something he isn't.

"I don't try to be anything fancy. I haven't changed since I've been elected," said Alexander, who is beginning his fourth term. "A lot of people want to be policy wonks. I don't."

"I'm more concerned about what I can do to influence the daily lives of people in the 5th District rather than influence events around the country or world."