

Lewis will run again

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Rep. Jerry Lewis, the longtime congressman who has weathered negative publicity stemming from a federal investigation into his relationship with a now-defunct lobbying firm, will seek another term, he announced Friday.

Lewis, R-Redlands, joined the House of Representatives in 1979.

During his time in Congress, he has earned a reputation as a legislator frequently able to secure large amounts of federal dollars for his constituents.

Although Lewis has borne recent criticism in some conservative circles for his approaches to government spending, he said Friday that a key reason he wants to remain in Congress is so he can continue to find funding for local projects.

"My taxpayers sent an awful lot more to Washington than they get back," Lewis said in a telephone interview.

Lewis' announcement dispelled rumors that he planned to retire from Congress.

Political columnist Robert Novak gave the scuttlebutt some ink in May when he wrote that the word among Republicans on Capitol Hill and in the Golden State was that Lewis would not seek another term.

"Nobody ever talked to me about (retiring). I've only known Robert Novak for 30 years, and he never bothered to call me," Lewis said.

Even before Novak's column ran, local Democrats were excited about the possibility of Lewis leaving Washington - perhaps even before his term expired.

In February, San Bernardino attorney and former mayoral candidate Tim Prince announced he would run for Lewis' seat as a Democrat if Lewis resigned from Congress.

On Friday, Prince said he now plans to run for a full term in Congress next year. Prince plans on making a campaign issue of the fact that Lewis has been the subject of a federal probe.

"The central issue in this race is upholding the highest ethical principles and maintaining the wall between lobbyists and policymakers," Prince said.

Public knowledge of the Department of Justice investigation stretches back to 2006, when federal authorities issued subpoenas to several local governments seeking information in connection with an inquiry into Lewis' relationships with lobbyists and contractors.

The investigation appeared to zero in on Lewis' ties to Copeland, Lowery, Jacquez, Denton and White, a lobbying firm that disbanded after the investigation became public knowledge.

The government has not charged Lewis with any crimes, and the congressman has consistently denied any wrongdoing.

The investigation has not generated major news in recent months, and Lewis said he has not been personally contacted by any investigators.

"I've never had a conversation with the people who are supposedly investigating me," Lewis said.

Thom Mrozek, spokesman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles, declined to comment on the inquiry.

Another front where Lewis has been challenged is his support of earmarking, the process through which members of Congress insert funding for specific projects in spending bills.

Lewis has never been shy about his success in being able to secure money for his district, which includes much of the East Valley, San Bernardino Mountains and some of High Desert. On Friday, he proudly cited allocations to clear bark beetle-infested trees in the local forest and the proton-beam therapy program used for cancer treatment at Loma Linda University Medical Center.

"Members of Congress are elected to represent their constituents as best they can," Lewis said before adding his opinion that the elimination of earmarking would not reduce federal spending but instead give more budgeting power to unelected bureaucrats in Washington.

Lewis is the highest-ranking Republican on the House Appropriations Committee, which controls more than \$900 billion in federal discretionary spending.

Lewis ascended to the committee's chairmanship in 2005 but lost the post after Republicans lost control of the House as a result of the 2006 midterm elections.

On Friday, the conservative Flash Report blog criticized Lewis' spending policies and derided the Republican for supporting "a corrupt pork-barrel process" that would make it more difficult for the GOP to recapture Congress.

Lewis dismissed blogs as political gibberish.

"I do not even look at their stuff," he said.

For his part, Lewis blamed the GOP's 2006 defeat on the negative publicity the party endured in the wake of the Mark Foley scandal.

Foley, a Florida Republican, quit the House after the national media was full of news about Foley's sexually explicit computer messages to male congressional pages.

Douglas Johnson, a fellow with the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, said controversy regarding the earmark process along with public disappointment over the handling of the Iraq war and the Foley scandal combined to cause Republicans to lose their congressional majorities in November.

Johnson also predicted that in the absence of dramatic news, it would be unlikely for Lewis' political prospects to be harmed by a seemingly quiet federal probe.

"Nothing seems to be happening," Johnson said.

Lewis had nothing to say about how his party might be affected by Sen. Larry Craig, the Republican who is the latest lawmaker to be embarrassed by allegations of sexual misconduct.

Looking forward to next year's contests, Lewis predicted that the biggest issue would be Iraq.

Lewis declared himself in support of President Bush's policies and intentions of fostering a constitutional government in Iraq.

"We certainly cannot afford to be anything less than successful in Iraq," Lewis said.

Prince's take on the war is completely different.

Prince said Congress must support a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and cannot make any compromises on the matter with the White House.

"There's no excuse for Congress to continue to support the unlimited policies of the Bush administration. We need to begin withdrawing troops immediately," he said.

Regardless of which issues dominate the 2008 race, any Republican enjoys a numerical advantage in Lewis' 41st Congressional District.

Prince expressed confidence that a Democrat could ride voter dissatisfaction to a victory, but any public umbrage next year would have to be strong enough to overtake the GOP's benefit of running a candidate in a district that is 47 percent Republican and 32 percent Democratic.

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