

Walden Rises Up From Obscurity

By Jackie Kucinich, CQ-Roll Call

Rep. Greg Walden of Oregon appears to have done all the right things to win him an appointed seat at the GOP leadership table: be a good team player, prove you've got political and policy chops, and have friends in high places.

House Minority Leader John A. Boehner of Ohio tapped Walden last month to serve as the chairman of the Republican leadership, a post that has been vacant since Rep. Rob Portman of Ohio left the House in 2005 to serve in the Bush administration. At the time, questions abounded about why Boehner would pluck a relatively obscure member from the back benches and place him in the leadership.

But Walden had a somewhat hidden portfolio: He may be National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman Pete Sessions' (Texas) closest friend, he had become a regular counsel for leaders on top issues, and he was willing to give up a powerful committee post to make room for the Conference's newest lawmaker.

"We wanted to put Greg in a position where he is at the leadership table every week," said Sessions, who last year appointed Walden to serve as his deputy chairman at the committee.

But the roots between Sessions and Walden run deeper than many political allies.

Sessions said their friendship began a decade ago when their young sons embarked on a treasure hunt together around the congressional office buildings. Since then, Walden's son Anthony has spent nine summers with Sessions' family in Dallas. Sessions' son Bill has spent three with the Waldens.

Last August, Sessions and his family spent time hiking around Oregon with the Waldens.

"Since Pete took over, he and Greg have been a team," said Rep. Mike Conaway (R-Texas).

As Sessions' right-hand man, Walden found himself meeting with the Conference leadership at least once a week.

"I began to have weekly interaction [with Republican leadership] on the campaign side," Walden said in a recent interview with Roll Call. "That evolved to this year, they invited me to go to the leadership planning retreat in Annapolis prior to the Conference retreat. That was really the first time I had been at the leadership table."

One GOP leadership aide said leaders were so impressed by Walden's political savvy and knowledge of campaigns that they wanted him to be an official regular at their leaders-only meetings.

"Greg has a very unique sense of members and what makes them tick," said Minority Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia. "He's been a very articulate advocate of the kinds of things our new majority will be about."

While Walden's likability and political know-how got his leadership's attention, GOP sources speculated that it was his willingness to sacrifice for the Conference that ultimately won him a chair at Boehner's table: Walden relinquished his seat on the exclusive Energy and Commerce Committee for recent party-switcher Rep. Parker Griffith of Alabama.

"No one else would leave the committee," one Republican operative said. "So they asked Walden and he, very wisely, said yes."

The operative said Walden's willingness to take one for the team helped secure him the slot as leadership chairman and could lead to a much more prominent role in the future. Past leaders have used the job to reward their most loyal members, close allies and rising stars.

"He is really emerging as a leader in the party," the operative said.

When asked, Walden said he decided to give up his Energy and Commerce post so he could spend more time on his leadership duties. He said he will keep his seniority on Energy and Commerce and plans to return to the post in January. While the committee is important to his home state, he said a leadership position will enable him to do even more.

"The opportunity to be at the table ... spreads out my influence beyond one committee — albeit Energy and Commerce is a very important committee — and really gives me and Oregon for the first time in 40 years someone at the leadership table in either party," he said.

Walden said that while the chairman of Republican leadership has no set duties, leadership felt it was important he had a title that reflects the role he's had in the Republican Conference.

"I think, in part, because they have other plans for me to be involved, and I think from Conference perspective it is a role that the Conference recognizes has been filled before," Walden said. "There has to be some precedent for the process."

Walden, who was tapped to serve on the GOP whip team in his third term, has operated just outside the leadership circle since he came to Congress in 1999. And while he's not well-known outside his Oregon district where he once owned and operated radio stations, he has built a reputation among members and staff as an able communicator who can help bridge differences among the Conference's various political factions.

"He has shown himself to be so politically astute in maneuvering on behalf of the NRCC," Conaway said. "He's been around for a while and has good instincts that are hard to replicate."

Walden has also been a reliable fundraiser for the NRCC. In the 2008 cycle, he gave \$166,000 to the committee and several thousand dollars to individual candidates, according to CQ MoneyLine.

He's also an important voice for the Conference, said Rep. Mike Rogers of Michigan.

"He's like the sage in the room," Rogers said. "He's not going to get down and knock down microphones and shout at the top of his lungs but he is incredibly effective with members and he has very, very, very good political savvy."

Walden is the fourth member to hold the leadership chairmanship post. Former Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.) created the role in the mid-1990s to bring his close ally, Rep. Robert Walker (Pa.) into the leadership circle. When Walker retired in 1996, Rep. Bill Paxon (N.Y.) filled the position. In 2001, Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (Ill.) tapped Portman for the slot.

Where Walker served as liaison between Gingrich and the committee chairmen, Walden's time is likely to be split between politics and policy.

One of his tasks will be to help Boehner and Sessions with the NRCC's "sell the fight" initiative — a campaign to help the GOP make the case to members, outside coalition groups and K Street that it can take back the majority this year, according to aides familiar with the program.

"We, between Leader Boehner, [Cantor] and myself, decided that we need to focus more firepower directly on the subject of selling the fight," Sessions said. "Selling the fight is my plan, the NRCC's plan, for engaging the American people with our candidates, with our Conference" to retire Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.)

Walden will also use his new post to expand a transparency initiative that he and Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.) launched last year.

Walden said legislation they already introduced, which would mandate that all bills before the House be made public for at least 72 hours before members cast a vote, would serve as a foundation for the program.

"Transparency is probably going to be the biggest initially and then being available to talk about what we will do if we are in the majority and the fact that we can get the majority," Walden said.

"So for me, this is more about institutional reform regardless of who holds the gavel," he added.

Baird said he was confident that Walden would follow through with his pledge to make the House more transparent regardless of who is in control of Congress next year.

"I have no doubt about it," Baird said. "My understanding is that John Boehner said very clearly [to Republicans] that if we sign on to this, we have to do it. And more power to them.

"I wish our party would do the same."