

Strand's delegates gird for a new era

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By Robert Morris - rmorris@thesunnews.com
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Horry and Georgetown counties' four representatives in Washington - Republican U.S. Sens. Jim DeMint and Lindsey Graham, Republican U.S. Rep. Henry Brown and Democratic U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn - all have one thing in common: When this congressional session ends, they will return next year to a Washington radically changed by this year's elections.

The economy, they agree, will continue to be the foremost priority as the country's leaders attempt to battle recession. But on how to do that, and their priorities afterward, all four have sharply different ideas.

The stimulus package

President-elect Obama has discussed a wide-ranging public building program intended both to create jobs and address infrastructure needs. As the majority whip in the Democratically-controlled House of Representatives, Clyburn may have the most hands-on role of anyone in the S.C. delegation in any bill that passes.

Alongside the roads and bridges that will be built "for the common good," Clyburn said, he will strive to "get rid of the blighted schools" in the impoverished areas of his district around Interstate 95. Obama visited the region while campaigning in the S.C. primary, mentioning a Dillon school in his famous "Yes, We Can" speech.

"I'm going to remind all the people pulling this package together that the folks in my district are not just guinea pigs," Clyburn said. "They were used as political props, and now they're going to be given props."

Brown, a member of the House's transportation committee, said he will focus on transportation initiatives to benefit the coastal Carolinas. He suggested the expansion of short-line and high-speed rail services through Myrtle Beach and Charleston, improvements to the Intracoastal Waterway that would create more barge commerce, and especially the hastening of the proposed Interstate 73 to Myrtle Beach.

For I-73, a particular benefit of an infusion of cash from the stimulus package is that it would likely come without a requirement for local matches, Brown said.

"A plan like this is the only way it's going to happen," Brown said.

Instead of borrowing money, Brown said Congress should allow more domestic oil and natural gas production off the coast, in Alaska and in the Midwest to pay for the new initiatives.

A different approach altogether is being suggested by DeMint, who has crusaded against the \$700 billion Wall Street bailout package and the auto-industry bailout.

Instead of creating a new spending program, government should cut taxes and restrictions on corporations to make them more competitive and reduce all other spending.

“I believe the way to improve the economy is not to expand deficit spending,” DeMint said.

On the other hand, DeMint said he supports Interstate 73 and high-speed rail projects as the job of the federal government, because of their importance across state lines - compared with small projects that only serve a specific area.

Graham was serving his Air Force Reserve duty overseas this week and was unavailable to comment, but spokesman Kevin Bishop said the senator is waiting to see the actual shape of the Obama infrastructure proposal before he decides on it.

The new Washington

Beyond the economy, issues from this year’s campaigns - energy and health care, national security - remain themes for all four.

Clyburn said his legislative priorities will focus on what he calls the four e’s: the economy, education, energy and the environment. He said he hopes to see greater federal investment in community health centers, and predicted that children’s health insurance will pass.

The expanded majority will make Clyburn’s job as majority whip slightly more difficult, he said - he will now have nearly 260 Democratic votes to keep in line, rather than 236 from the previous session. Having a president in his same party, however, will make a difference, he said.

“Because we can do things without the threat of a veto, it makes the job a little more enjoyable,” Clyburn said.

Though Republicans will be outnumbered, Brown said the system still affords the minority party a seat at the law-making table. At the same time, he said, the Democrats’ expanded majorities and hold on the White House will create high expectations for them to perform.

“I think it puts a lot of pressure on the majority party to produce,” Brown said. “The American people are going to be looking to the leadership within the Democratic structure to get some things done.”

In his first term, Graham often played the role of the compromiser, leading bipartisan efforts on immigration and energy. He also formed a close bond with Sen. John McCain, and, immediately after Obama’s election, Graham and McCain met privately with Obama and his chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel.

In his second term, Graham will continue that approach, Bishop said. He is always ready to help craft a solution to the big problems - Social Security, Medicare, immigration - that can only be solved by the parties working together.

“He’s going to work with Sen. Obama where he can and oppose him where he must,” Bishop said.

DeMint, meanwhile, will likely continue making a different name for himself, that of a conservative champion of smaller government.

A front-line leader in the minority campaign against bailouts, DeMint characterized Republicans' role as offering "alternatives" to the current thinking.

On health care, he said, he will be crafting a package to offer as an alternative to the Democrats' plan.

"We need to send up the red flags and alarms that what's happening now is the socialization of America," DeMint said. He added: "The federal government is doing so much more than it can do well now. Every time we ask it to do something local, we compromise its ability to do something national that it should be doing."

Contact ROBERT MORRIS at 626-0294.