

Suburban Delegates Prep For New Role in Congress

By Eric Krol

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Rep. Peter Roskam of Wheaton formally succeeded longtime conservative icon Henry Hyde in Congress Thursday, but as he took the oath of office, his mind was on Gerald Ford.

"Right now, I'm reading a history of the House of Representatives, and when you read and contemplate the caliber of people who have served in the House - Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. Gerald Ford, he was a House guy," he said. "That's one of the things that was going through my mind."

The 6th District's new representative, who defeated Democrat Tammy Duckworth two months ago, was flanked by his four children as he was sworn in, with his wife, parents and siblings sitting upstairs per House rules.

Roskam was the only new member of the suburban congressional delegation as the Democrats took control of both chambers, with many of the state's lawmakers preparing for new roles at the Capitol.

In the House, Democratic Rep. Jan Schakowsky of Evanston will serve in leadership as a chief deputy majority whip. Democratic Rep. Melissa Bean of Barrington started her second term

Thursday serving in the majority after being in the minority party her first term. The two suburban Democrats are among the House's record 71 women members, which also includes new Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, the first woman to hold that title.

Republican Rep. Dennis Hastert of Plano assumed a seat near the back of the House, a contrast to the previous eight years when he was in charge of the chamber as speaker. While speculation looms in Kane County that Hastert will retire before his term is up, the former speaker has said through spokesmen that for now, he plans to serve it out.

Rep. Don Manzullo, an Egan Republican whose district includes much of McHenry County, gave up his chairmanship of the House Small Business Committee. Republican Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park began his third term while his counterpart from Naperville, Rep. Judy Biggert, started her fifth.

In the Senate, Democratic Sen. Barack Obama of Chicago took time away from mulling a presidential bid to run the chamber for the first time as his party took the reins of power. The duty wasn't as glamorous as it sounds, consisting mostly of recognizing a few senators to speak in an otherwise empty room for an hour or so.

Perhaps most importantly to Illinois' clout, Sen. Dick Durbin of Springfield assumed the No. 2 position in Senate Democratic leadership, making him the delegation's most powerful member.

As for Roskam, he hopes his experience serving in the minority in the state House and Senate will help him be effective for the DuPage County and northwest Cook County people he serves.

"What's effective is the ability to sit down and talk to people and find out where the common ground was," said Roskam, who plans to reach out to conservative Democrats.

Today, Roskam expects to find out what committees he'll serve on. He's been lobbying for seats on the financial services and transportation panels.

Does he hope to be in the House as long his predecessor, the 16-term Hyde?

"This is a seniority-driven institution. That's just the nature of it. In order to be effective, you've got to spend time here," he said. "(But) your guess is as good as mine."