

Heller a rising star in Congress with GOP in control

By Erin Kelly, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON – When Republican Rep. Dean Heller came to Congress four years ago, he was all but lost among the wave of jubilant Democrats who had just won control of the House.

Now, as he begins his third term, the 50-year-old Carson City resident has gone from a relatively powerless newcomer to a congressman with real clout.

Not only has his party taken back the House majority, but Heller has a coveted seat on the powerful Ways and Means Committee and counts new House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, among his closest friends in Congress. Boehner said he speaks with Heller often and sees him playing an important role in “getting Americans back to work.”

As his star rises, Heller, who represents Congressional District 2 which includes Reno, acknowledges that he is considering a 2012 bid for the U.S. Senate seat now held by scandal-plagued Nevada Republican John Ensign. A poll released Jan. 11 by Public Policy Polling showed Heller beating Ensign in a GOP primary, 52 percent to 34 percent.

“He has a real opportunity now to step up and be a leader both within the House and in rallying the state Republican party,” said Eric Herzik, chairman of the political science department at the University of Nevada, Reno.

While Heller’s increased clout will boost his political ambitions, the congressman prefers to focus on how it could help his Northern Nevada district.

Heller’s connections to Boehner and other House leaders give

him a much stronger chance this session to pass legislation such as the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act, which died in the last Congress. The act, which Heller plans to reintroduce soon, is a \$415 million, eight-year bill aimed at restoring the lake by keeping out invasive species, improving water clarity, reducing the threat of devastating fires and protecting wildlife.

The legislation must go before the Natural Resources Committee, where bills from the majority party are passed at a much higher rate than bills from the minority party. Heller also gets along well with the new committee chairman, Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., and is optimistic that Hastings will help expedite the bill.

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