

Impacts of term limits to shake up status quo in Nevada Legislature

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – For years the Nevada state Senate was a pretty stable place, with many lawmakers serving for decades.

From one election cycle to the next, the names and faces in the 21-member body didn't change very often.

That reality was altered in a big way when term limits finally began to have an impact on the state Legislature starting in 2010.

And in this election cycle, already it appears that a minimum of nine incumbents, or more than 42 percent of the Senate, will be gone as of Election Day on Nov. 6.

Term limits, redistricting and personal decisions by lawmakers not to seek re-election are all playing a role in the significant turnover.

So in addition to the political ramifications for Democrats, who are trying to hold on to their one-seat majority, and Republicans, who are seeking to retake the majority, the Senate will have to face the reality of multiple new members when the 2013 session begins Feb. 4.

Sen. Mo Denis, D-Las Vegas, said the new reality with term limits and resulting turnover can be viewed as a challenge and opportunity.

"I think that it makes the work of caucuses a little bit more ...; you do more work because you want to make sure you get good people that can move up and work and do the things that need

to be done," he said.

"I think the candidate recruitment is an important part of that, that you're trying to get good people that can step up," Denis said. "And at the same time, training people and getting them up to speed. That means you have to do more work in the interim, that kind of thing, so people are up to speed."

There is a loss of legislative institutional memory when long-time lawmakers leave, but it also provides a chance for new people with fresh ideas to participate, he said.

The Legislative staff has helped by adding more training so new lawmakers are ready to get to work as soon as the session begins, which is also limited to 120 days, he said.

The Nevada Legislature only meets every other year and Denis said the panel is looking at ways to improve the legislative process and make it more responsive to the public.

Sen. Michael Roberson, R-Las Vegas, said the turnover is not a major issue for Republicans because of the quality of candidates being recruited to fill the 10 seats in play.

"It's more of a problem for the Democrats," he said. "I think their caucus is a little chaotic at this point. And so their bench is pretty thin. They lost a lot of experienced state senators. We only lost a couple, frankly, from this past session. So from our perspective we're fine with the turnover. Not so sure the Democrats should feel the same way."

There were worries going into last session that the large amount of turnover in the Assembly and Senate due primarily to term limits would negatively affect the performance of the Legislature, Roberson said. But a number of new lawmakers in both parties and in both houses stepped up to make a major contribution, he said.

The same scenario is expected in 2013, Roberson said.

“So we’re going to have a lot of smart people, a lot of very capable people, in our caucus in the Senate next session.

“The key thing is, whether you’ve been there 20 years or two, we’ve got to work together to solve the problems of the state of Nevada,” he said. “And we’ve got to get past excessive partisanship and figure out a way to work with each other. That’s what the people want. That’s what I’m committed to do, that’s what our Senate caucus is committed to do.”

Term limits continues to take its toll on the ranks of lawmakers. Four state senators, Dean Rhoads, R-Tuscarora, Mike McGinness, R-Fallon, and Valerie Wiener and Mike Schneider, both D-Las Vegas, are all leaving office this year due to term limits. The four lawmakers combined have more than 70 years of service in the Senate.

Two other senators who are completing their first terms, Shirley Breeden, D-Henderson, and Allison Copening, D-Las Vegas, have announced they will not run for new terms.

Another, Sen. Steven Horsford, D-Las Vegas, is running for the house in Nevada’s new 4th Congressional District. Sen. Barbara Cegavske, R-Las Vegas, is a candidate for the house seat as well, and would make the turnover numbers even higher if she wins.

In a surprise move last month, Sen. Sheila Leslie, D-Reno, resigned from her seat in mid-term because she is moving into the district represented by Sen. Greg Brower, R-Reno, where she plans to run for election. One of the two lawmakers will be out of a job on Election Day.

And in another move in what was a busy month for the state Senate last month, Sen. Elizabeth Halseth, R-Las Vegas, announced she was resigning in mid-term for personal reasons.

Leslie’s and Halseth’s Senate seats will be filled in the 2012 election as well. Assemblywoman Debbie Smith, D-Sparks, has

already announced her plans to run for Leslie's seat.

The turnover doesn't only mean new faces, but new leadership as well. Roberson and Denis, the expected caucus leaders for next session, are in the middle of their first terms in the Senate, although Denis also served for a time in the Assembly.

Eight current members of the Senate who are in mid-term and are expected to return in 2013 are freshman, having been elected in 2010. In the 2013 session, only three of 21 members will have served more than one legislative session in the Senate, although quite a few members do have prior experience serving in the Assembly.

Assembly experience will likely be a factor in the 2013 senate as well, with a number of Assembly members of both parties seeking Senate seats.