

Tampa Tribune: Fla. Rep: Nobody Elected Me To Love DC

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Media General News Service

January 4, 2008

WASHINGTON -- A year after he succeeded disgraced former Florida GOP Rep. Mark Foley in Congress, Tim Mahoney says he doesn't particularly like Washington.

More precisely, Democrat Mahoney says he doesn't like the partisan wrangling that prevents what can be accomplished in the nation's capital. His effort to depict himself apart from most other politicians is clearly intentional.

"Nobody elected me to go to Washington D.C. and fall in love with it," says Mahoney.

Rather, Mahoney said that during his first year in Congress he's done exactly what he promised Florida's 16th Congressional District voters as a candidate in 2006.

"I made promises that when I went to Washington I wasn't going to worry about Iran or the ice caps melting," Mahoney said in an interview. "I go to work every day and all I care about is Florida and Floridians. I'm the chief lobbyist for the 16th Congressional District."

But Mahoney, 51, a Palm Beach Gardens millionaire with an executive background in the business fields of computer equipment and financial services, is already in the cross-hairs of Republicans looking to pick up congressional seats next fall.

Three Republicans have lined up for the chance to unseat the freshman in his Republican-leaning south-central Florida district, which includes Highlands County.

They are state Rep. Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart; Tom Rooney, a lawyer and Army veteran who is a member of the family that owns the Pittsburgh Steelers football team; and Hal Velache, a Palm Beach Gardens city councilman and former Navy Pilot.

And GOP operatives in Washington have been attacking Mahoney's claims to being a middle-of-the-road congressman, or conservative "Blue Dog Democrat." Rather than being independent-minded, they cast him as someone who votes in lock-step with liberal House Democratic leaders.

"If you combine Tim Mahoney's penchant for tax hikes and runaway spending with his utter lack of passion for serving the people of Florida, you have all the makings of a top-tier target," said Ken Spain, a spokesman for the National Republican Congressional Committee, which organizes the party's national strategy in House races.

Added Spain: "His abysmal record exemplifies the current frustration that people have toward this wildly unpopular Democrat-led Congress, but it has provided incentive for Republican challengers lining up to take him on."

Anyhow, Republicans say Mahoney's victory as a first-time candidate was a fluke, a product more of the sudden scandal in 2006 surrounding Foley's sexually explicit electronic messages to underage congressional pages.

By the time Foley resigned his seat on Sept. 29 that year, it was too late for Republicans to remove his by-then-politically-radioactive name from the GOP line on the November ballot. That meant voters had to decipher that casting a ballot for the disgraced Foley was actually a vote for his party's replacement, then-state Rep. Joe Negrón.

In a district where enrolled Republican voters outnumbered Democrats 202,702 to 171,474, Mahoney won by two percentage points - getting 50 percent of the vote to Negrón's 48 percent.

In the interview, Mahoney acknowledged that he came into Congress "under unusual circumstances."

But he's proud of his accomplishments during his first year in Congress, asserting that he's established one of the most conservative voting records - "certainly for a Democrat."

Mahoney disagreed that he's been marching lock-step with the Democratic Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi.

In fact, voting data tracked by The Washington Post shows that Mahoney voted with his party leaders 90 percent of the time in the more than 1,100 votes taken last year. But the average for all other House Democrats was even higher -- 92.4 percent.

Of the 52 Democratic freshmen House members nationwide, only eight broke more often with party leaders than did Mahoney. By comparison, another Florida Democratic freshman member of the House, Tampa's Rep. Kathy Castor, voted in step with party leaders 97.6 percent of the time.

Some political experts inside the Washington Beltway agree that Mahoney is potentially vulnerable. But they also say he will be anything but a pushover next year.

David Wasserman, the U.S. House editor of The Cook Political Report, a non-partisan newsletter, lists Mahoney's congressional seat as "leaning Democratic." That means the race in 2008 for the seat is considered potentially competitive, but that the incumbent Mahoney has the edge.

"Certainly it was an unimpressive victory in 2006 for Mahoney, given the fact Mark Foley was still on the ballot against

him," said Wasserman.

"But the (2008) Republican primary is late - on Aug. 26 - so Republicans are looking at a very narrow time frame in which they can fight Tim Mahoney after battling each other for the next eight months," said Wasserman.

Wasserman said the race between the three Republicans for the chance to take on Mahoney at first blush seems very competitive, with Harrell's already being a state representative from the region putting her in the best "geographical" position to win. But he said Rooney has the means to buy advertising to create buzz in Washington and Florida.

As a congressional incumbent, Mahoney - who does not have a primary challenger -- will enjoy a range of advantages over his eventual GOP challenger.

These advantages helped incumbents in Congress to record a 91.3 percent re-election rate in 2006, according to the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University School of Public Affairs in Washington.

Mahoney's campaign committee's latest filings with the Federal Election Commission show that he has already raised more than \$1.3 million in contributions between January and Sept. 30, and has \$1.1 million left in the bank. He took in \$2.8 million on his way to victory in 2006.

His three would-be Republican opponents have so far reported collecting a combined \$1 million; Rooney leads the way by collecting nearly \$429,000, and had \$337,019 on hand as of Sept. 30.

Incumbents also can build up good will in their districts by securing special federal funding for favored projects at home. Though he is a freshman lawmaker, Mahoney has already obtained a number of these items, including \$425,000 for constructing a new Highlands County Veterans Service Office.

An incumbent also can grab media exposure through well-timed legislation or other congressional activities tied to the news of the day.

Upon arriving in Washington, Mahoney teamed with fellow Florida Democratic freshman Ron Klein of Boca Raton to address the skyrocketing homeowners' insurance costs in hurricane-prone areas. As members of the House Financial Services Committee, they together introduced a bill to expand private industry's ability to provide such coverage and help states to better manage the risk.

The measure passed the House in a 259-155 vote. Democratic Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Bill Nelson of Florida have introduced a companion measure in the Senate.

Mahoney said the bill was "not on the top of anybody's list" when he and Klein arrived in Washington.

He conceded that they may have gotten help to get it passed because they are perceived as potentially vulnerable freshman and Democratic House leaders "very much want Ron and I to come back." But he also said "no one's going to bring foolish legislation to the floor just because you're a freshman," and that the bill's passage "showed we're capable of getting something done."

One potential Achilles Heel may be Mahoney's penchant for blunt or even bold language about Washington and his job, something Republicans have sought to seize upon.

The congressman is still smarting from being quoted in May by The Hill - a Washington-based newspaper that reports on Congress - as saying, "Very candidly, this isn't the greatest job I've had."

Spain, the NRCC spokesman, says that quote - picked up by newspapers in the Sunshine State -- is an example of Mahoney's "utter lack of passion for serving the people of Florida."

But Mahoney said the comment was taken out of context by "an inside Washington rag."

He explained that he was responding to a reporter's question, and was actually referring to all the political gamesmanship that goes on in lawmaking.

To cite a recent example, Mahoney pointed to how he and other Blue Dogs were recently put in an awkward position on a difficult tax bill that would shield millions of middle-class taxpayers from the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT) for one year. But to do that, it would make up for the lost tax revenue by raising the tax rate on private equity and hedge fund managers.

It was a false choice, Mahoney said, forced upon House Democratic leaders by the maneuvering of President Bush and Senate Republicans.

"That's what's wrong with Washington," Mahoney said.

But Mahoney said he definitely considers his getting elected to this job "as a great thing," he said.

"I do miss the control over my life and my schedule," Mahoney admits.

For instance, he says the job requires sacrifices he's never had to make before, such as missing some of his 21-year-old daughter's competitions as captain of the Oklahoma State University equestrian team.

Before coming to Congress, Mahoney said he'd attended every event his daughter ever competed in - and still tries to make as many as he can, even those held in Oklahoma.

But Mahoney said the trade-off is that he's proud of the hard work he's putting in for his constituents. He says he'll be eager to put that record before the voters later this year.