



Swanson takes office after years toiling behind-the-scenes

East Bay Democrat joins growing Black Caucus

By SHANE GOLDMACHER

After more than three decades of working behind-the-scenes on the East Bay's political stage, Sandré Swanson is finally stepping into the spotlight.

A 30-year staffer to two of Oakland's best-known--and most liberal-politicians, Congresswoman Barbara Lee and former Congressman and Mayor-elect Ron Dellums, Swanson won his own Assembly seat in a landslide election earlier this month.

"I've already had one career and now I am trying to make a contribution to my community," said Swanson, whose district represents part of Oakland, Alameda and Piedmont.

Born and raised in Oakland by a bus driver and nurse, Swanson developed a reputation as a workaholic during his years as a legislative staffer.

On campaigns, which he has been running since he guided Lionel Wilson's successful bid to become the first African-American mayor of Oakland in 1977, he would often set up a makeshift bedroom in the campaign headquarters.

"He can work 24, 30 hours straight and he can expect other people to work the same energetic schedule," said Keith Carson, president of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors and chair of Swanson's campaign. "We've all labeled him a per-



Incoming Assemblyman Sandré Swanson (right) with his former boss, Rep. Barbara Lee of Berkeley.

fectionist on some level and a person with incredible tenacity."

Swanson, 58, said he "usually gets in two days work in one 24-hour time." That's because he sleeps only five hours a night, a trait he attributes to his years of constant cross-country red-eye flights as chief of staff to Rep. Lee.

"My clock got all off and it never straightened out," Swanson said.

Lee said Swanson's work ethic and his years of legislative experience will make him an effective lawmaker from the start. "He brings not only an understanding of the politics and the policy, but how to get things done," said Lee, who served in the California Legislature before her election to Congress in 1998. "Especially with term limits, it is important to hit the ground running."

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And hitting the ground running is exactly what Swanson intends to do.

Even before he officially won his seat in November, Swanson already was working with Assemblyman Mervyn Dymally, D-Compton, to craft legislation to return control of parts of the Oakland school district to the local level. The district is currently in state receivership.

“Education is supposed to be our greatest example of democracy, and with the Oakland schools system in receivership with a state-appointed administrator, it is hard to foster democracy and get the participation of parents, students and teachers,” Swanson said. “I have committed myself to putting in legislation that will help to return control of the local school system to the local community.”

For all his staff-level experience, Swanson was not the favored horse in the four-way race in June’s Democratic primary. That honor belonged to Oakland City Attorney John Russo, a more moderate Democrat that had, at one point, a 4-to-1 fund-raising advantage over Swanson.

But Russo accepted spending limits—despite reaching the cap almost six months before Election Day—and a coalition of unions poured in more than \$300,000 to support Swanson in the waning days of the campaign.

Larry Tramutola, an Oakland-based political strategist unaffiliated with either campaign, said it took “the perfect storm” to beat Russo.

According to Tramutola, that storm included two second-tier candidates draining support from Russo; Swanson’s endorsement by the state party; Dellums’ late-announced candidacy for Oakland mayor, which invigorated Swanson’s geographic and ideological base; and labor’s independent expenditures against Russo, which tarred him as a Schwarzenegger clone in a district where Democrats outnumber Republicans six to one.

“Had all these things not happened, Russo would probably have been

elected,” Tramutola said. Instead, Swanson won 43.1 percent to 35.2 percent, with the other candidates finishing a distant third and fourth.

In the general election, Swanson coasted to victory, winning a higher percentage of the vote (90.1 percent) than any other candidate in a competitive race statewide.

Swanson’s victory was also a gain for the California State Legislative Black Caucus, which has eyed the district as top priority to elect a black legislator ever since the seat slipped into the hands of Green Party candidate Audie Bock in 1999.

The compact district, which covers the East Bay from Oakland to Alameda and inland to Piedmont, is one of the most ethnically diverse in the state, with 30 percent African Americans, 19 percent Asians and 21 percent Latinos.

Swanson will be the first African American to represent the district since his former boss, Lee, ascended to Congress in 1999. Swanson joins what has bulged into a nine-member Black Caucus, the biggest in years, as the only African American representing a Northern California district.

“He is a very stable, matured individual,” said Dymally, the 80-year old chair of the Black Caucus. “He is a cool guy. He’s been there, done that. He’s not trying to get in front of the cameras.”

Raised in the East Bay, Swanson’s first successful election was as president of Laney College in 1970. In that role, he pushed to stop the war in Vietnam and bring a child-care center to the campus.

He has been involved in progressive politics ever since.

Swanson said he is coming to Sacramento to push a progressive agenda, particularly around the areas of education and public safety.

Like many East Bay liberals, Swanson began his career under the tutelage of then-Congressman Ron Dellums, whose former staff peppers

most of the boards and commissions in the East Bay. Dellums alumni include Lee, Swanson and Carson.

In 1986, Swanson made a bid for Alameda County supervisor, when he lost to an up-and-comer by the name of Don Perata, the current Democratic leader of the Senate.

“I told him thanks, I got a federal pension of it,” joked Swanson, referring to his tenure on the congressional payroll.

In 2001, it was Swanson’s job as a congressional deputy that briefly thrust him onto the national political stage following the terrorist attacks of September 11. His then-boss Lee cast the lone dissenting vote on a resolution authorizing the Bush administration to use military force in response to the September 11 terror attacks.

But for Swanson, it was more personal. His cousin, Wanda Green, whom he had grown up with in Oakland, was a flight attendant on Flight 93, the United plane that crashed in rural Pennsylvania.

Despite the loss, Swanson urged Lee to oppose the war-authorization measure.

“In the midst of the personal tragedy that he was experiencing, he really understood very clearly why this resolution was a blank check and why it wasn’t going to address terrorism and the tragedy of 9/11,” Lee recalled.

The vote drew praise from within Lee’s district, but condemnation across much of the country. Thousands of letters and e-mails flooded the congressional office decrying the vote as unpatriotic in a time of war. Swanson had to reply to many of the angry callers.

“I had to field those calls. I never once let them know that I also had a tragedy in my family,” Swanson recalled. “We were convinced that was the right thing to do, and history has proved us right.”

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