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Oakland Assemblyman Loses Chairmanship Over Vote

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SACRAMENTO — Losing a chairmanship was worth voting his conscience, Oakland Democratic assemblyman Sandre Swanson said a day after Speaker Karen Bass informed him that he no longer held a prestigious post.

Swanson did provide critical votes for two budget bills that required the vote of all Assembly Democrats. But he was stripped of his chairmanship of the Assembly Labor and Employment committee after voting against a spending cap measure and other issues that were key to a hard-fought deal between legislative leaders and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in closing a \$41 billion deficit with a mix of taxes, spending cuts and borrowing.

Bass had vowed to impose discipline on any member who strayed from the Democratic caucus and followed through on the threat this week by punishing Swanson and two other members who voted against the spending cap proposal, which won approval and is headed to the ballot in the May 19 special election.

“I explained to her ahead of time that the budget was going in a direction I had serious problems with,” Swanson said Wednesday. “There were so many penalties and take-aways from working families. I feel good about the votes I cast.”

Several components of the budget deal were particularly onerous, he said, including one bill that would have capped hourly wages at \$9.50 for in-home care workers and frozen payments to the poor, elderly and disabled, which will cost Alameda County upward of \$25 million in funding.

“To ask members not to protest these cuts — it’s a violation of my principles when I know workers are there to serve

the elderly, catch a person when they fall,” Swanson said. “Particularly at a time when this budget had \$1 billion in tax breaks for corporations.”

He said he couldn’t vote for the open primary measure, now headed to the 2010 ballot, saying it went against his belief that “Democrats should have the ability to vote for Democrats.”

He also objected to the spending cap proposal, as well as agreements to impose furloughs on state workers, eliminate holiday pay and take away the eight-hour work day. “I couldn’t in good conscience vote for all that,” he said. “I understood the consequences.”

Close votes require caucus unity, said Steve Maviglio, a Democratic consultant and former aide to ex-Speaker Fabian Nunez. Anyone who veers from the party line puts added pressure on the rest of the caucus — particularly those members from competitive districts.

“Sometimes you have to do what’s best for the caucus and not stand up on your soap box,” Maviglio said. “Swanson is a very well respected member. But people are probably saying, ‘I had to suck it up; why didn’t he?’ Especially when you’re in a noncompetitive district. It leaves the speaker relying on vulnerable lawmakers to cast a difficult vote that could hurt them later.”

The budget fallout has hit both parties. A day before the budget was approved, Senate Republicans ousted their leader, Sen. Dave Cogdill, R-Fresno, for forging the deal that included \$12.8 billion in taxes. And the state GOP voted at their annual convention to withhold financial support in future campaigns from Cogdill and five other Republican defectors who voted for the budget.

Democrats needed every vote they could get on the budget, which requires



a two-thirds vote, after being able to pull only three Republicans across party lines in both houses with major concessions such as the spending cap, corporate tax cuts and changes to worker rights.

“This really points out the strong need for reform in budgeting, including a strong look at the two-thirds vote,” said Melissa Michelson, political science professor at Cal State East Bay. “That’s what people will take from this. Nobody will blame Democratic leadership for making the deal because they had to have a budget.”

Swanson will lose three staff members that came with his chairmanship, but Wednesday he found out that he is being reassigned to the Rules Committee, where he will retain a budget for staff. He also remains chairman of the Legislative Black Caucus, and as a member of the budget, banking, utilities and commerce and redistricting committees.

He also gets to keep his office space in the Capitol.

“It’s a mid-size office, so I don’t think anybody wants it,” he said. “Hey, voters sent me to Sacramento with a chair, a microphone and a vote. I still have that.”

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