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Rep. Jane Harman's seat: Let the race begin

'The time is right for a new challenge, and this is the right challenge,' says Harman, who is leaving office to become president of the Woodrow Wilson International Center. Her departure has sparked a scramble to fill a rare open seat in Congress. Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn says she will run. California Secretary of State Debra Bowen also is considering it.

By Jean Merl and Richard Simon

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Reporting from Los Angeles and Washington

Rep. Jane Harman's appointment as president and chief executive of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars became official Tuesday, a day after the congresswoman announced she would step down.

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Harman will take over the job on Feb. 28, the center announced.

"The time is right for a new challenge, and this is the right challenge," Harman said in a statement. "The privilege of representing the people of California's 36th Congressional District will likely never be surpassed, and I am grateful to my constituents, staff, and colleagues in the House. But the opportunity to lead and shape the direction of the country's premier policy incubator – one with

international reach and influence – is a thrilling next step for me.”

Joseph B. Gildenhorn, chairman of the center’s board of trustees, made the announcement.

“Jane Harman brings an extraordinarily high level of leadership and knowledge to the center that will propel this great institution to even higher standards of excellence,” he said.

Harman's departure has touched off a scramble for the chance to fill a rare open seat in Congress. At a news conference Tuesday at the Wilson center, Harman didn't directly answer a question on whether she would endorse a candidate to succeed her in Congress.

"I'm glad there's so much interest in the seat," she said. "It won't be my call what happens."

She suggested that perhaps House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco and other California House Democrats will "try to winnow that list" of candidates, noting that if a candidate receives more than a majority of the vote in a special election, there won't need to be a runoff election.

"I think everyone is interested in getting the vacancy filled quickly," she said.

On Monday, Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn said she would be a candidate. California Secretary of State Debra Bowen, who represented much of the district in the Legislature, let it be known that she was "seriously considering" the idea. Activist Marcy Winograd, who mounted a strong but unsuccessful challenge to the moderate Harman from the left in last year's primary, said she was "exploring the possibility."

And Republican Mattie Fein, who lost to Harman in November, 60% to 35%, said she might run again.

"There will be a lot of people who will be quite interested in this congressional seat," said Rep. Henry A Waxman (D-Beverly Hills).

Once the seat becomes vacant, Gov. Jerry Brown will have 14 days to call a special election. It is likely to be held in June, when Brown also hopes to ask voters to renew \$9 billion in higher sales, income and vehicle taxes.

The race to replace Harman, 65, will be among the first tests of California's new election system, which voters approved in June. If no candidate receives a majority, the top two vote-getters meet in a runoff -- even if they are members of the same party.

"This is the first road test for an election system that could dramatically change the way candidates are selected," said Dan Schnur, director of USC's Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics.

Given the Democratic leanings of Harman's district -- registered Democrats outnumber

Republicans 45% to 28%, and Barack Obama carried it by 30 percentage points in the 2008 presidential election -- the seat is likely to remain in Democratic hands.

"If there is going to be a battle, it will be a battle between two top-flight Democrats," said Eric Bauman, chairman of the Los Angeles County Democratic Party.

But the race could become a "battle for the soul" of the party between the "progressive left and more conventional liberal Democrats," said Allan Hoffenblum, a former GOP consultant and publisher of the Target Book, which handicaps legislative races.

Harman is a member of the "blue dogs," a group of moderate and conservative Democrats whose diminished ranks in the Republican-controlled House have pushed the Democratic caucus further to the left. The Almanac of American Politics calls Harman the most conservative Democrat from Los Angeles.

USC political scientist Sherry Bebitch Jeffe noted that Harman has long been attacked from the left. "But one of the reasons she has held onto the seat is that she is a moderate Democrat," Jeffe said.

Harman's 36th Congressional District hugs much of the Los Angeles County coast, beginning with the Harbor-area communities of San Pedro and Wilmington and moving north and west through part of Carson, Lomita, Torrance and the coastal cities of Redondo Beach, Hermosa Beach, Manhattan Beach and El Segundo. It includes Marina del Rey and Harman's home, Venice, as well as Mar Vista and Palms.

UC Berkeley political scientist Bruce Cain said Harman's departure could foreshadow more retirements by veteran California House Democrats frustrated by life in the minority and anxious about the uncertainty over new district boundaries, which will be drawn by a citizens panel using 2010 census data.

Jeffe said the redistricting process could limit interest in the race, especially for politicians not facing term limits in the near future. "Whoever wins and runs [in the special election] doesn't know what the district will be under the new lines. That's a risk some people won't want to take," she said.

Harman, the former top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, gained national attention as a leading voice on national security issues. She is married to Sidney Harman, the stereo industry magnate who recently bought Newsweek.

After her party won a majority in 2006, she was passed over for the chairmanship of the Intelligence Committee because of her strained relationship with Pelosi. In addition, some members of her party considered her too moderate.

She first won election to the House in 1992 but gave up her seat to run for governor in 1998, losing to Gray Davis in the Democratic primary. She reclaimed the House seat in 2000.

Harman's announcement took constituents and officials by surprise. Bauman said he was "pretty shocked."

"I'm sure a special election is going to cost a lot of money," said Marilyn Green, 80, a Democrat from Manhattan Beach. "I'm sort of disappointed."

David Hadley, 46, also of Manhattan Beach, a Republican who has voted for Harman -- but not last fall -- said, "The worst thing, if you look at the turnout in special elections, is then their successors will be chosen by a small fraction of the voters."

Winograd, who won 41% of the vote in last year's primary, said Harman's decision to resign so soon after the election was disappointing. "It would have been more respectful of the district and her constituents to have bowed out earlier," she said.

Winograd now lives in Santa Monica, which is outside the district. There is no district residency requirement to run for Congress.

Bowen's campaign consultant, Steve Barkan, said the secretary of State was "seriously considering running."

And Hahn, who lost the Democratic primary for lieutenant governor last year, said in a statement, "I plan to work hard to win this seat."

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