

Campaigns underway for Legislature leadership

BY TYLER BRIDGES

Staff writer

They are the two most important political races underway in Louisiana this year that no one is talking about, at least not openly.

They are the behind-the-scenes campaigns to elect the next Senate president and House speaker.

The elections won't take place until January, but the main contenders in each chamber have already emerged, and the politicking has begun.

The candidates are barely known throughout the state, but the stakes are huge.

Consider what happened to Gov. John Bel Edwards when he miscalculated after his election in 2015 and thought he could continue the tradition of newly elected governors dictating who would lead each chamber.

Edwards tapped then-Rep. Walt Leger, D-New Orleans, to be speaker in January 2016. But Republican House members rebelled and used their sizable majority to line up behind Taylor Barras, a little-known Republican from New Iberia, on the night before the vote. Barras and his leadership team repeatedly stymied Edwards' initiatives over the next four years.

The 2019 election to be speaker also turned out unexpectedly. Republicans thought they would use their majority to elect their consensus pick, Rep. Sherman Mack, R-Albany. But Rep. Clay Schexnayder, R-Gonzales, forged a coalition of Democrats and Republicans, with Edwards quietly helping to put the two sides together. Schexnayder won 60 of the 105 House votes to become speaker.

"The speaker and the Senate president are essentially the coach and the quarterback in how to get votes to pass legislation," said Bernie Pinsonat, a veteran political analyst. "They are the two key people of the Legislature."

The main three contenders to be chosen as Senate president next year are Sen. Mike Reese, R-Leesville; Sen. Cameron Henry, R-Metairie; and Sen. Beth Mizell, R-Franklinton.

The leading candidates to be speaker are: Rep. Neil Riser, R-Columbia; Rep. Jack McFarland, R-Jonesboro; Rep. Jerome Zeringue, R-Houma; Rep. Brett Geymann, R-Lake Charles; Rep. Beau Beaulieu, R-New Iberia; and Rep. Daryl Deshotel, R-Hessmer. Rep. Paula Davis, R-Baton Rouge, has been talked about as a candidate, but she said she hasn't decided whether to seek the position.

How the race is won

The campaigns are mostly waged through private one-on-one conversations in and around the Capitol and in legislators' districts. At least one would-be speaker has already been traveling the state to try to line up votes.

Current and former legislators note that for all the campaigning that will take place in the coming weeks and months, wild cards could ultimately determine who is chosen as Senate president and House speaker when the next Legislature takes office in January.

On the House side, one key question is whether a Republican candidate can accumulate the 53 votes needed, a simple majority, from fellow Republicans, similar to how the speaker is chosen in Washington, D.C. Democrats might also band with Republicans to elect the speaker, as happened with Schexnayder in 2019.

Schexnayder, to the dismay of hyper partisan Republicans, awarded five of the 16 committee chair positions to Democrats. After a falling-out with the speaker, Democrats now hold two chairmanships.

On the Senate side, the question is whether geography or partisan politics will play a more important role in determining who becomes Senate president. Henry might appeal to Democratic senators in New Orleans because he's from Jefferson Parish. But Reese might be more attractive to senators from north of Interstate 10 because Senate presidents over the past 20 years have all come from south Louisiana.

Senate President Page Cortez, R-Lafayette, controls the Senate, overseeing his chamber in a bipartisan fashion. Republicans easily win partisan votes, but Cortez has won favor from Democrats by picking six of them to chair committees and ensuring that all Democrats receive at least one construction project in their district.

The other key dynamic in the leadership races will be who's elected governor this fall and whether he or she will put their thumb on the scale, as previous governors have done.

"I'll give opinions, not orders," Stephen Waguespack, a GOP gubernatorial candidate, said at an April campaign forum organized by the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana. (Waguespack is familiar with the process, having served as a top aide to then-Gov. Bobby Jindal.)

"I'll let them fight it out among themselves," said state Rep. Richard Nelson, R-Mandeville, another gubernatorial candidate. Several other candidates echoed his view.

Attorney General Jeff Landry, the front-runner at this point in the governor's race, didn't opine on that question. But he was one of the Republicans who launched attacks against Rep. Stuart Bishop, R-Lafayette, that helped sink Bishop's bid to be speaker four years ago.

Landry was working to elect Mack with the Louisiana Committee for a Conservative Majority, which represents another wild card: the role of outside interest groups in electing favored candidates in the fall elections.

Baton Rouge businessman Lane Grigsby, who is a megadonor to conservative causes, will likely play a role, as he did four years ago when he supported Mack.

"I don't have a questionnaire or a litmus test," Grigsby said. "I try to talk to everyone and see what kind of character they have. My money is not to buy influence. It's to allow good candidates to get their voice out to their constituents."

The candidates

The speaker and Senate president serve essentially as player-coaches. They decide who serves on which committees, including the coveted chair position. They set the priorities and tone for their respective chambers. They meet with the governor to discuss important legislation.

They also can determine the ultimate shape of legislation by choosing the members who will settle on the final language of a bill when the House and Senate pass different versions of that bill.

The Senate president gets to pick all three Senate conferees, while the speaker chooses one of the three in the House. The bill's author and the committee chair automatically serve as House conferees. That's only one area where the Senate president has more influence over that chamber.

"It's easier to corral people in the Senate than the House," said John Alario, the former representative from Westwego who is the only person in Louisiana to serve two terms each as House speaker and as Senate president. "In the House, you have factions within factions. It's more difficult to manage."

Reese, a Senate contender, has served only one term in the Legislature but has already won attention as a genuine lawmaker who can work with anyone.

A confidante of the outgoing Cortez, Reese has been in the middle of negotiations repeatedly over spending, taxes and numerous other issues.

"We have a job in front of us first to build a team for next year," said Reese, a 47-year-old business owner with interests in trucking, commercial real estate and warehouses.

Henry, another Senate candidate, fell just short of winning the speaker's race in 2015 and then threw his support behind Barras. In return, he received the plum position of chairing the Appropriations Committee, which writes the House's version of the budget.

Henry, a protégé of U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, is known for his political cunning and knowledge of the state budget.

How the 48-year-old Henry, who didn't respond to interview requests, makes a living is not clear. His personal disclosure report simply says he's a consultant.

Mizell, the Senate pro tem, is an ardent conservative. A 71-year-old part-time rancher and retired preschool owner, Mizell expressed surprise at how early the Senate president campaign has begun, saying that, four years ago, it didn't start until after the election qualifying period.

Among the speaker candidates, Riser has the most experience, having served three terms in the Senate, including a turn chairing the Senate tax-writing committee, before term limits led to him to run for his House seat.

Riser is known as a skillful political strategist who works easily with Democrats and Republicans alike. The 61-year-old Riser owns a funeral home and is a bank director.

McFarland has emerged as a leader in the House by chairing the 42-member Conservative Caucus. The owner of a company that harvests, trucks and sells timber, McFarland spent eight years as president of the Winn Parish Police Jury before winning election to the House in 2015.

McFarland, 53, has already begun touring the state to meet with legislators - and legislative candidates - to seek their support.

Zeringue, 61, has gained extensive credibility by crafting the House budget over the past four years as chair of the Appropriations Committee. He is part of Schexnayder's inner circle.

Asked if he will do much campaigning for the top leadership position, Zeringue said no and added, "Taylor Barras walked in and one day later was speaker."

Deshotel, 48, said he plans to begin seeking the support of his colleagues more intensively once the legislative session ends on June 8. Sitting on a pile of cash after selling two high tech companies he owned, Deshotel said he is planning to use some of that to help elect political allies to the House.

Geymann, 61, has made a name as a conservative budget expert, having served under Republican and Democratic governors during his four terms in the House.

Beaullieu, 48, a well-regarded freshman legislator, said it's too early to be talking about the speaker race.