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GOP sees a chance to gain ground

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Democratic state legislators are seeing something unusual in South Jersey -- an upsurge in members giving up their seats.

So far this year, at least three local legislators -- former state Sen. John Adler and Assembly members Douglas Fisher and Sandra Love -- have either left or announced plans to leave the State House. A fourth, state Sen. Dana Redd, could be on the same track.

"I don't think we've ever seen this kind of turnover," said state Sen. Stephen M. Sweeney, D-Gloucester, who is not part of the exodus. "This is high."

To hear Democrats describe it, the departures are largely a sign of success. And the process of replacing the incumbents will bring fresh blood and new energy to the party, according to Assembly Speaker Joe Roberts.

"That's a good thing," said the Camden Democrat.

But Republicans see a chance for GOP gains. In that view, at least three Democrats -- recruited to fill empty seats -- will run as relative newcomers in November's general election.

"They're absolutely vulnerable," asserted Tim Saler, executive director of the Camden County Republican Committee.

The latest departure plans were announced Thursday, when Love, D-Camden, said she would not seek a second term this fall due to a "health issue." Love represents the 4th District, which covers parts of Camden and Gloucester counties.

Two weeks earlier, Fisher, a four-term incumbent from Cumberland County, was tabbed as the state's next Agriculture Secretary. Party leaders have said Celeste Riley, Bridgeton City council president, is to replace Fisher after he's sworn in to the Cabinet post. The 3rd District also covers Salem County and part of Gloucester County.

And Adler, a Cherry Hill Democrat, left the 6th District Senate seat he'd held since 1992 to enter Congress on Jan. 6. Former Camden County Clerk Jim Beach, a co-chairman of the Democratic county committee, was appointed his successor.

All of the Assembly seats will be on the fall ballot.

Another opening could come in the 5th District, where Redd is running as the heavy favorite to be Camden's next mayor.

However, Redd's Senate seat is not on the November ballot and the first-term senator could keep her state office until she takes the mayor's oath early next year, observers note.

The upcoming transition period offers opportunities for both parties, said Ingrid Reed, a project director at the Eagleton Institute for Politics at Rutgers University.

She said the GOP could wage a tough fight for Love's seat, noting 4th District voters previously have elected Republicans to both the Assembly and the Senate.

"That's the one to watch," Reed said. "It looks kind of unstable."

Saler, the GOP executive director, is more bullish.

"They'll have all the weakness of being held responsible because they're the incumbent party," he predicted of the Democratic replacements. "But they'll have no benefit of being well known or having provided services."

Saler also said the GOP has seen more interest from potential candidates this year, suggesting Republican hopefuls "realize this is a better opportunity."

Roberts, an Assembly member since 1987, rejects that view.

"It's a challenge whenever you lose veteran lawmakers with experience and seniority," he said. "But just because someone is new to the Legislature doesn't mean they're new to politics and leadership."

Reed said the Democratic Party has the chance to make itself younger and more diverse through new candidates.

In the 3rd District, for instance, Riley, 49, was named to follow Fisher, 60. Similarly, Redd, 40, could replace octogenarian Gwendolyn Faison as Camden's mayor.

"It's a new generation and these are up-and-comers" Reed said. "The county (Democratic committee) would not have picked them if they weren't the best bet to get votes.

The changes reach down to the local level, as other party members jockey for the new legislators' former jobs. Camden County is awaiting a new clerk, for instance, while Bridgeton will be looking for a council member.

"With every move, there are a couple of other moves," Sweeney said. "It's a chain reaction."

At the same time, some hopefuls will learn their time has not come -- at least not yet.

"We have a lot of quality candidates," said Sweeney, the Senate Majority Leader. "The hard thing is you can only pick one. You have to tell people, 'Just because it's no this time doesn't mean it will be no the next time.' "

How people react to being passed over could affect their future in politics, added Reed.

"If you really want to have a team, you've got to stick with it," Reed said. "People don't like complainers."

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