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Lawmakers duck gun control

By JANE ROH • Courier-Post Staff • January 16, 2011

Of the handful of legislative responses to this month's tragic mass shooting that killed six and nearly claimed one of Congress's own, a bill co-sponsored by Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg, D-N.J., is the toughest.

It is also unlikely to reach President Barack Obama's desk.

New Jersey's senior senator and Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, D-N.Y. -- whose husband was slain by a gunman in 1993 -- plan to introduce a bill that would outlaw the manufacture and sale of high-capacity clips such as those allegedly used in the Jan. 8 attack on Rep. Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson.

Suspect Jared Lee Loughner is believed to have used a 33-round magazine clip in a legally purchased Glock 19 when he sprayed the crowd with bullets before being tackled by bystanders.

High-capacity clips were outlawed in the Clinton-era federal Assault Weapons Ban, which a GOP-controlled Congress allowed to expire in 2004.

While Democrats retain control of the Senate and White House, it is unlikely tougher gun restrictions will be enacted in Congress now or in the near future. That's because the National Rifle Association is one of the country's most powerful lobbies.

"By most measures, the NRA is one of the 10 best lobbying houses in Washington," said Steven Billet, a lobbying expert at George Washington University.

The NRA also is one of the most moneyed interest groups in the country -- it spent more than \$2 million on lobbying activities in 2010.

Then there's the famous NRA grading system. Candidates with a B or better in areas with relatively high gun ownership will often tout an endorsement. A grade of D or worse can be deadly in conservative-leaning parts of the country.

All seven New Jersey Democratic congressmen and both senators have an F from the NRA. Rep. Scott Garrett of the 5th District has an A, and Frank LoBiondo of the 2nd District has an A-minus. Reps. Chris Smith and Leonard Lance both received a C.

"There are limits'

Rep. Rob Andrews's 1st Congressional District includes Camden as well as rural Gloucester County. He is unapologetic about his F grade.

"The Second Amendment guarantees people the right to bear arms. But like all other constitutional rights, there are limits," said the former attorney, who supports tougher screenings and opposes automatic weapons.

Last week, the NRA issued a statement of condolence for the victims of the Tucson tragedy. The association has declined all other media requests, including comments for this story.

New Jersey is a densely populated, moderate blue state in which gun ownership is low. The state's one-handgun-a-month purchasing limit is among the most restrictive in the country, and its background check requirements are among the toughest.

The NRA has not spent heavily on campaigns here, which was not the case elsewhere in the country last fall.

"If you look at the breakdown of Congress after the last election, 50 members of the Senate rate an A and 262 House members rate an A," Billet said. "The chances of anyone moving comprehensive gun control through the 112th Congress is really minute."

In New Jersey, gun rights are such a nonissue, the

last time the Rutgers-Eagleton Institute of Politics polled on it was in 2003. That survey found just 14 percent of state residents owned a gun -- compared with 41 percent nationally.

But attention to the issue has increased recently because of national interest in Gov. Chris Christie for higher office.

During his gubernatorial bid against the F-rated Jon Corzine, Christie straddled a line between not spurning moderate Democrats and not inviting the ire of the NRA.

"We have a densely populated state and there's a big handgun problem in New Jersey," Christie said when pressed by FOX News' Sean Hannity in October 2009. "On certain gun-control issues . . . seeing how many police officers were killed, we have an illegal gun problem in New Jersey."

In recent months, Christie has couched his reluctance to loosen gun laws as a nonstarter, thanks to the Democratic-controlled Legislature.

"I'm going to -- pun intended -- keep my powder dry on this and I'm not going to get involved in the middle of this issue except when I think that the laws have been enforced in an unjust or unfair way," the governor said at a town hall event on Thursday.

"I've already shown people in this state -- by what I did with Brian Aitken before Christmas -- that I will not hesitate to act."

Christie commuted the Mount Laurel man's seven-year sentence for unlawful possession of a handgun that he'd purchased legally in Colorado late last year. It was a case watched closely by gun-rights advocates across the country.

But as far as indications of Christie's position on the Second Amendment go, the Aitken case is a poor one. The governor's commutation was more about undoing a misapplication of existing law than about gun laws themselves.

"I feel very strongly that Gov. Christie dodged the question," said Frank Fiamingo, who founded the New Jersey Second Amendment Society last June. "Right now we don't know where he stands."

Christie may continue to avoid the question without political repercussion as long as he insists he has no higher political ambitions.

Few pursue

In the meantime, most members of Congress will also likely duck questions about tougher gun control.

"Look at the people who are talking about moving gun legislation," Billet said. "Rep. McCarthy has historical and personal reasons to try to move on the issue. The only other people talking about it are in safe Democratic seats or maybe aren't going to run the next time around."

At 86, Lautenberg reasonably fits into both categories. Andrews has signed on to the high-capacity clip bill, as has Rep. Rush Holt of the 12th District.

Questions have been raised about whether standing up to the NRA is as politically risky as is perceived. A 2009 survey of gun owners conducted by GOP pollster Frank Luntz found many agree with restrictions usually associated with gun opponents.

Nearly 70 percent of NRA gun owners and 85 percent of nonmember gun owners backed closing the gun-show loophole -- that is, requiring background checks for purchases at gun shows. A surprising 69 percent of NRA owners and 74 percent of non-NRA owners opposed federal laws prohibiting interagency sharing of gun-trace data and requiring the FBI to destroy background records after 24 hours.

Andrews said the disparity between the NRA's lobbying arm and its rank-and-file members was no

surprise.

"Compromise saps their fundraising ability. They need to get their base excited about a fight," he said.

Rep. Jon Runyan, whose wife, Loretta, is a former police officer who owns a firearm, said he would oppose efforts to tighten gun laws.

"Technically, one bullet can kill a person," the 3rd District Republican said of Lautenberg's bill. "Again, it's stepping over that line. These restrictions aren't going to solve any problems."

"In the hands of a law-abiding individual, a 30-clip magazine is not a problem," Fiamingo agreed.

Different take

Brian Malte of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence said Lautenberg's bill was just common sense.

"It's very obvious if the shooter had less firepower there would have been more people alive and fewer people injured," he said of the Arizona shootings. "We've heard from the gun lobby and they have come up with no legitimate reason people should have that much firepower."

Malte also had a different take on the 2010 elections, pointing out that mostly pro-NRA Democrats lost. He said the NRA's silence last week was telling.

"This is what they do after every tragedy: They don't say anything. They try to wait until the issue blows over and then it's back to their 'guns anyplace, anytime, for anyone' agenda."

Malte joined others calling on the Obama administration to push for Lautenberg's bill. The president has disappointed gun-control advocates by not pushing harder for reinstatement of the Assault Weapons Ban.

Meanwhile, there simply isn't enough organizational opposition on the Hill to build momentum on the issue.

"What are the gun-control guys doing? Well, nothing, frankly," Billet said. "Unless someone can find a way to bypass the NRA, there really isn't much opportunity for them to do anything significant here."

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