Legislative successes give embattled Blanco a boost

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By Jeff Crouere

Several months ago, Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco was lampooned as incompetent and indecisive. She was reeling from Hurricane Katrina and criticized for not showing bold leadership. She failed in the legislative sessions called after Katrina to pass her agenda. Others took the initiative on reform measures and Blanco was seen more as a symbol of "politics as usual." It became so bad that Blanco faced a recall effort, launched by a frustrated St. Martinville resident appalled by the governor's lack of effectiveness.

What a difference a few months makes. Now, Blanco is celebrating a successful session. She achieved almost all her goals, including passage of the Road Home plan, a teacher pay raise, a record $26.7-billion budget and consolidation of New Orleans government.

The key to Blanco's success might have been the hiring of former Speaker of the House Hunt Downer as her new legislative director. Downer has good relations with legislators. He was able to effectively sell the Blanco agenda and accurately inform the governor when any problems arose.
With the passage of the Road Home plan and congressional approval of the full amount of community development block grants, the state will soon disburse grants of up to $150,000 each to hurricane victims. These grants will allow homeowners to rebuild their properties and spur economic activity in devastated areas. When the money finally starts to arrive, Blanco will no doubt receive at least some political credit.

Still, Blanco is by no means a favorite for re-election next year. The last polls showed Blanco at only a 39 percent approval rating.

In addition, a number of formidable candidates are seriously considering a race next year, including Rep. Bobby Jindal, R-Kenner. However, Blanco is back from the political dead and a player once again in next year's election.

Carter's BOLD move

State Rep. Karen Carter, D-New Orleans, will likely begin a race for Congress' District seat soon. Carter is a moderate African-American legislator who has reform credentials and worked with the group Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans to pass levee board reform and consolidation of New Orleans government. Her family is wealthy and will likely be able to fund a
full-scale race for Congress. It is unknown whether Rep. Bill Jefferson will
be indicted before the election or actually run for re-election, although he
says he is in the race. Carter is a member of the BOLD political
organization, one of the most powerful and influential African-American
groups in New Orleans. Councilman-at-large Oliver Thomas is also a member of
BOLD and looking at the race for Congress. However, Thomas will likely
remain in his Council position, preparing for a run for mayor in four years,
and Carter will carry the BOLD banner in the congressional race.

There has also been talk that former New Orleans Councilman at-large Eddie
Sapir, a white Democrat, will run for the seat. Sapir has crossover appeal
and is popular in the African-American community.

Broussard opposition

Embattled Jefferson Parish President Aaron Broussard survived a recall
attempt this year, but must face voters in fall 2007. Broussard, guided by
veteran campaign consultant Jim Carvin, will definitely run for re-election.
Even his most ardent admirers realize it will be a tough campaign. Broussard
was criticized for sending pump operators to Washington Parish before
Katrina hit. This action led to flooding in some Jefferson Parish
neighborhoods and thousands of angry constituents. Since then, Broussard has
revamped the parish evacuation plan and pledged pump operators will remain
in the parish for the next hurricane, protected in new "safe houses." Will it be enough to save his job?

Being a Democrat, Broussard will surely face a challenge from a prominent Republican. One possibility is Jefferson Parish Councilman-at-large John Young, who sparred with Broussard at Council meetings post-Katrina.

Prominent Jefferson Parish business leaders are also encouraging former gubernatorial candidate and state Sen. Ken Hollis, R-Metairie, to challenge Broussard. Hollis is term limited in the Legislature and may jump into the race against Broussard. He is also considering a race for Public Service Commissioner against incumbent Republican Jay Blossman.