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Baca in way of seat swap

By Edward Barrera, Staff Writer
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While a redistricting initiative appears doomed for Tuesday's election, at least one West End race next year is expected to spew more than a few fireworks.

Assembly members Gloria Negrete McLeod, D-Montclair, and Joe Baca Jr., D-San Bernardino, are set to face off for the 32nd Senate District seat being vacated by term-limited Nell Soto, D-Ontario, next year.

Between Baca's name recognition and McLeod's legislative tenure, political observers predict a bruising affair among two energetic campaigners who share fairly similar viewpoints.

"It's going to be a war," said Jim Freeman, a political consultant who has been involved with campaigns in the Inland Valley. "The race will be decided by the candidate who lays out a clear-cut plan, vision if you will, of what they want to accomplish ... I would tell them to start knocking on doors in January."

Due to term limits and political ambition, several elected officials - McLeod, Baca and Soto - and one political novice with a fortunate last name, Jeremy Baca, Joe's younger brother, plan to play musical chairs.

Soto and term-limited McLeod are attempting to swap seats, but Joe Baca Jr., first elected in 2004, stands in McLeod's way. And Jeremy intends to slide into his brother's soon-to-be vacant Assembly seat.

The flip-flopping of seats is not unheard of, but it is unusual, said Douglas Johnson, a consulting fellow for Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute of State and Local Government.

"It's pretty clear that party control and party bosses want to keep districts safe, knowing term limits would continue opening seats, and this is an example of what happens," he said.

Each district - Assembly districts 61 and 62, and Senate District 32 - hold large Democratic voter majorities.

While the 35-year-old Joe Baca Jr. has only been an assemblyman since 2004, he said his experience outside the Legislature, including working as a teacher and probation officer, gives him real-life lessons that make him a perfect candidate for the Senate district that stretches from Pomona to San Bernardino.

"I'll bring a lot of energy to Senate," Baca said. "I think it's important that people see a leader championing for them, and I want to be that leader who can be a voice for the community."

McLeod, 64, said Baca has little experience in a policy-making position, paling in comparison with her own legislative and community achievements.

"I have 10 years legislative experience, and I have lived in my district as long as he is old," McLeod said. "My life experience trumps his. My elective experience trumps his. But ultimately it will be the people who will decide what that experience means to them."

While McLeod and Baca are considered to have similar voting records, they diverge on one highly publicized bill.

Baca abstained from voting on a recent bill legalizing same-sex marriage, while McLeod voted for it. And though the governor ultimately vetoed the bill, neither candidate believes that vote will affect the outcome of the June 2006 Democratic primary.

"I did what I did because I believe everyone deserves the same rights, and I'm not going to apologize for it," McLeod said.

The potential of having three Bacas -- Joe Jr., Jeremy and their father, Rep. Joe Baca Sr., D-San Bernardino -- holding legislative office has rankled some, according to one observer.

A longtime San Bernardino resident and publisher of Black Voice News, Hardy L. Brown said many in the black community have supported the Bacas in the past, but believe other candidates are more qualified than the two siblings.

"I think Joe Sr. is trying to build a dynasty, and I can understand that as a father myself," Brown said. "But his sons have not showed that they have learned the basics of public policy. I think offspring should demonstrate that they have more to offer the

community outside of their name."

Assemblyman Baca said that while he is proud of the family name, and of his father's accomplishments, that name is also a double-edged sword.

"My father has name recognition because he has worked so hard, so I have to work twice as hard because of that," Baca said.

Both 32nd District candidates expect a hard-fought campaign. While McLeod has nearly \$445,000 in her campaign coffers, Baca has just over \$4,000, according to secretary of state records.

No one expects that disparity to continue.

"Joe (Jr.) has the name recognition with his father a member of Congress, so he can raise a lot of money, which brings him a certain amount of strength to compete even as a first-time assemblyman," said John Longville, former Rialto assemblyman.

But don't count out McLeod, Longville added. "I think she is a strong candidate. She is intelligent, tough, and is highly regarded in Sacramento."

Edward Barrera can be reached by phone at (909) 483-9356.