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Sewell Turns Alabama House Race Into a Dead Heat

By Rich Daly
WeNews correspondent
Tuesday, June 1, 2010

Update: Since this story ran, Terri Sewell and Shelia Smoot won enough votes to face each other in a runoff race on July 13.

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WASHINGTON (WOMENSENEWS)--Terri Sewell, a political novice running to be the first African American woman to represent Alabama in the U.S. House of Representatives, has captured strong backing from women's groups and Democrats nationally.

She heads into today's primary as a long-shot candidate now in a dead heat with two main rivals, Shelia Smoot and Earl Hilliard, for the seat of four-term Democratic incumbent Rep. Artur Davis, who is stepping aside to run for governor. Davis is known for being the only African American member of Congress to oppose the recently enacted national health care law.



Parade for Terri Sewell

Credit: Courtesy of Terri Sewell for Congress. © All rights reserved.

If the vote is too close today a July 13 runoff may be called.

In her bid to represent Alabama's 7th Congressional District--which runs southwest from Birmingham--Sewell made up for her relatively low name recognition with an assertive push for support from national women's groups. She has won endorsements from EMILY's List, the National Organization for Women PAC and the National Women's Political Caucus. Those groups in turn drew other Democrats from across the country behind her campaign.

"She's a tough cookie and she's put together a great campaign," said Jen Bluestein Lamb, communications director for EMILY's List, the Washington-based lobby that supports pro-choice Democratic female candidates.

Much of the campaign has focused on improving economic opportunities in the district, in which a quarter of the residents have incomes below the federal poverty level. The state faces an 11 percent unemployment rate.

The economic initiatives promised by Sewell, including efforts to garner federal tax credits and incentives for businesses to help them grow and hire new workers and increased funding for work-force development and career and technical education, are touted by her supporters. As a public-finance lawyer with experience raising money for capital projects, Sewell is seen as uniquely qualified to seek funds to spur so-called green manufacturing jobs and to improve infrastructure.

Funding Advantage

President Obama has not taken an official position on the race but his political organization, Organizing



for America, has called for support of Sewell on its Web site.

Sewell's national profile garnered the Birmingham lawyer \$759,000 from individuals and \$23,750 from political action committees as of May 12, according to Federal Election Commission filings. Those figures dwarf the campaign chests of her opponents in the predominantly Democratic and African American district. All the candidates are African American. The second-best fundraiser is state Rep. Hilliard, an attorney and former local filmmaker, who raised \$208,000 from individuals and \$116,000 from political action committees.

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