

January 6, 2009 - Murtha Climbs Seniority List

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Tenure among longest in House

BY MIKE FAHER

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With 2008 having marked his 34th full year in the House of Representatives, U.S. Rep. John Murtha already ranked high on the congressional seniority list.

And he will take a few more steps up that ladder when the 111th Congress is officially sworn in today.

Murtha is set to become the 12th longest-serving member of Congress and eighth most-senior House member, with 12,755 days of service.

Even at age 76, he repeatedly has said he is not considering retirement.

"It's really exciting for me, and I'm in good health," Murtha told The Tribune-Democrat in an October interview. "So as long as I'm in good health, I'll be running."

Murtha is beginning his 19th term, having first won his seat in a special election in February 1974. He has often cruised easily to re-election since.

Last year, even with an unexpectedly strong challenge from Republican William Russell, Murtha still garnered nearly 58 percent of the vote.

The congressman is considered one of the most influential House members, a status gained in part through his long tenure:

• Murtha is the "dean" of Pennsylvania's congressional delegation, with more time in Washington than any currently serving federal legislator from the Keystone State.

• By February 2010, Murtha will have the most service of any Pennsylvanian to ever walk the halls of Congress. At this point, only former U.S. Rep. Joseph McDade — a House member from 1963 through 1999 — outranks Murtha in that category.

• The congressman's office on Monday reported that, of the nearly 10,650 people who have been representatives in the House, only 81 have served longer than Murtha.

The congressman moved up the congressional seniority rankings by four due to a mixture of circumstances.

U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici and U.S. Rep. Ralph Regula, both Republicans, did not seek new terms. Democratic U.S. Sen. Joe Biden will be serving as vice president under the Obama administration.

And longtime Republican U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens, under the cloud of a conviction on federal corruption charges, lost his bid for re-election.

If Murtha runs for a 20th term in 2010, he will turn 78 during that campaign. And if he wins, he will continue a remarkable run for incumbent congressmen representing Johnstown.

No incumbent serving the city has been defeated since 1948, when five-term Republican Harve Tibbott lost in what was then the 26th district.

The next two congressmen serving the area both died while in office: Democrat Robert L. Coffey was elected in 1948 and perished in a plane crash in 1949. His successor, Republican John P. Saylor, served until his death in October 1973.

Murtha took over for Saylor four months later.