



At 86, Rockwall Republican Ralph Hall seeks 16th term in Congress

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By TOM BENNING / The Dallas Morning News

WASHINGTON – Ask Rep. Ralph Hall when he might retire, and the 86-year-old congressman says he is waiting on Wal-Mart to tell him when he is old enough to be a greeter.

The deadpan humor is part of the folksiness that has endeared Hall to friends, foes and voters in northeast Texas for 30 years. And if the Rockwall Republican has his way, he's not done yet. Last month, Hall filed to run for a 16th term. Hall is the oldest member of the U.S. House. Elected in 1980, he has served longer than any other Texan now in Congress. He could retire at any time, and hardly a soul would fault him. He doesn't need the \$174,000 congressional salary, and some relatives say they wish he would stay home in Rockwall.

But Hall says there are too many things he has left to accomplish. He says Texas can't afford to lose his seniority – he's a longtime member of the energy committee, and the top Republican on the science committee. He wants to be there if Republicans retake the House – as he predicts they will this year.

"There is a great need to change the direction the government is going," he said. Beyond that, though, there is a sense that this job is Hall's life now.

His wife of 63 years, Mary Ellen, died a little more than a year ago. The pain is still evident. During a recent interview at his Capitol Hill office, Hall couldn't hold back the tears as he spoke of the woman he credits for nearly every one of his achievements. After pausing several seconds to regain his composure, Hall offered the most passionate explanation for why he wants to remain in Washington.

"I like what I'm doing up here," he said. "I know what I'm doing up here. And I want to keep doing it, as long as I'm strong enough to know that I'm doing it right."

Hall has heard questions about his age for years. Every two years, opponents stomp on the need for a fresh start. But Hall has won time and again by big margins; he took 69 percent of the vote in 2008.

"People might be in favor of term limits," said Paul Lenchner, a political science professor at Texas A&M University-Commerce. "They might not agree with all of his votes. But when it comes to good ol' Ralph, it doesn't matter."

It is not unprecedented for House members to work well into their 80s, and four Texans in Congress are in their 70s.

But Hall is approaching the record for oldest House member. Charles Stedman, a North Carolina Democrat, was 89 when he died in office in 1930 – when Hall was 7. The congressman dismisses concerns about his age with humor, issuing a puckish challenge to a one-mile footrace. But his daily routine is no joke.

He runs two miles every morning, although the workouts are on a brief hiatus while one of his medications changes. He tries to eat right, he said, and he doesn't drink. His longtime chief of staff, Janet Poppleton, also said the congressman fulfills the cliché of the boss who is the first to arrive and the last to leave.

Those close to Hall scoff at any suggestion that the time has come for him to step down. State Sen. Bob Deuell, R-Greenville, shares a constituent base with Hall and always tells voters that age shouldn't even be a consideration.

"He is sharp as a tack, and he has an endless supply of energy," Deuell said.

And Deuell knows better than most. During the late 1990s, he expressed some interest in Hall's seat. So Hall invited Deuell to Washington for a week to see the job first-hand. It happened to be the busiest week Hall can remember during his stay in Congress – breakfasts at dawn, banquets at night and meetings between.

Deuell backed out.

"I saw right then how hard he works," he said.

Hall's sustained passion for the job amazes science committee Chairman Bart Gordon. The Tennessee Democrat, who turns 61 this month, is retiring after this term.

"We all wish we could get a blood transfusion from Ralph," Gordon said.

Indeed, the biggest change in Hall's career has nothing to do with his age.

In 2004, Hall switched parties. That let him survive redistricting, and some Democrats accused him of opportunism. But Hall was far more conservative than most members of his old party, and as the years passed, he voted more often with Republicans.

"We were excited about the change," said Sue Evenwel, chairwoman of the Titus County Republicans. "We all knew that Ralph Hall had voted conservative all along."

Critics say the defection turned Hall from someone with an admirable independent streak into a predictable, rubber-stamp Republican. Detractors charge that Hall has not produced major legislation, despite his longevity.

"He's been in office for 30 years, but what has he done that has made anything better?" said Glenn Melancon, Hall's Democratic opponent in 2006 and 2008.

As Hall girds for his 16th congressional bid, he can expect opponents to try to use his tenure against him yet again. Sulphur Springs minister John Cooper, who is challenging Hall for the GOP nomination in March, lists term limits as a chief issue.

Said Smith Gilley, chairman of the Hunt County Democratic Party: "It really is past time to have new, young leadership."

But such barbs have had little effect over the years, in part because Hall shows few signs of slowing down. He flies home nearly every weekend to meet voters, and county Republican leaders across his district marvel at his ability to attend events in all corners – from just east of Dallas to Texarkana.

Keeping busy has certainly helped Hall cope with the loss of his wife, said one of their sons, Brett Hall, a state district judge in Rockwall. "I try and envision Dad coming home and just sitting down somewhere," he said. "But it won't happen. He just doesn't have the personality for it."

Hall's fundraising base remains strong, too. Last election, Hall outraised his Democratic opponent by \$1 million, and so far this cycle, Hall has raised \$230,000; Cooper has raised less than \$10,000.

This week, two more Republicans, Joshua Kowert and Steve Clark, filed to run against him. No Democrat has yet filed. The deadline is Monday. Even with his advantages, Hall ticks off legislative goals with the enthusiasm of a first-time candidate.

More than anything, he wants to reduce dependence on foreign oil, particularly by opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling. And Hall gets animated talking about plans to fight Democratic legislation on health care and climate change. "I want to straighten up a lot of these things," he said.

OCTOGENARIANS IN THE HOUSE

Name	State	Party	Age
Ralph Hall	Texas	Republican	86
Roscoe Bartlett	Maryland	Republican	83
John Dingell	Michigan	Democrat	83
John Conyers	Michigan	Democrat	80
Louise Slaughter	New York	Democrat	80

Oldest House members ever:

Name	State	Party	Age	Last year in office
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Charles Stedman	North Carolina	Democrat	89	1930
Sidney Yates	Illinois	Democrat	89	1999
Robert Doughton	North Carolina	Democrat	89	1953
Claude Pepper	Florida	Democrat	88	1989
Joseph Cannon	Illinois	Republican	87	1923
Ralph Hall	Texas	Republican	86	TBD

SOURCE: House Historian's office