


[news scoops](#)
[politics](#)
[commentary](#)
[policy briefings](#)
[roll call files](#)
[classifieds](#)
[hill directory](#)
[let's discuss](#)
[about roll call](#)
[home](#)

Issa Eyes Packard Seat Calif. Members Want to Blunt Dornan Interest

By [John Mercurio](#)

Eager to block a comeback bid by ex-Rep. Bob Dornan (R), California Republicans have recruited multimillionaire Darrell Issa (R) to run in Rep. Ron Packard's (R) district when the incumbent decides to leave the House, several GOP sources said.

A Packard spokesman said Friday that the nine-term Republican has not said he plans to retire from his 48th district seat next year and has been actively raising money for a 2000 re-election bid. As of June 30, Packard, who spent \$289,000 on his 1998 re-election bid, had \$405,000 in the bank.

But key sources said Packard, 68, chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee on Energy and water development, has privately hinted he may become the second cardinal to step down next year. Rep. John Porter (R-Ill.), chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, announced his retirement Oct. 12.

Packard, whose wife, Jean, suffered from ill health earlier this year, recently has declined colleagues' requests to confirm whether he'll seek a 10th term in 2000, House GOP aides said. And even if he decides to serve in the 107th Congress, sources said, Packard has openly discussed plans to retire in 2002, following the post-2000 Census redistricting of House seats.

While they traditionally try to avoid taking sides in divisive primaries, party leaders -- including California GOP Reps. Dana Rohrabacher, Christopher Cox, David Dreier and Ed Royce -- recently have discussed the race with Issa to ensure they have a strong challenger to Dornan. Republicans fear that Dornan would drop his planned challenge of Rohrabacher and run for Packard's seat if the incumbent retires this year, or he might wait and run to succeed Packard in 2002.

Issa said Friday that he has assured Republicans he will run when Packard retires.

"I've lived here for 15 years, and when [Packard] chooses to retire, if I'm still in the political arena and not elected to something else, this would be a great district to represent," he

said.

The potential for any open-seat House race in Southern California is apparently enough to motivate party leaders to find a viable candidate they can rally behind. House Republicans, who strongly opposed Dornan's bid to reclaim his old seat last year, are trying to soften their image among moderate voters and dread the return of Dornan's often polarizing rhetoric.

House Republicans "might be able to convince [Packard] to stick around for another two years, through redistricting. He's enjoying Appropriations and his health is good," said a House GOP aide. "But he's clearly thinking about retiring soon, and Republicans are clearly thinking about what to do, how to respond to Dornan, when he does. ... Issa has always been well liked by people. He would be a logical choice."

Dornan, who lost his 1996 re-election bid to Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D) in the nearby 46th district, last month declared his plan to challenge Rohrabacher next year in the 45th district's GOP primary. Dornan said he deeply resents Rohrabacher, a fellow conservative, for declining to help him beat Sanchez in 1996 or endorse him in 1998.

In an interview Friday, Dornan said he also would consider running to succeed Packard in the district where his daughter and grandchildren currently live. He recently bought property there and said he hopes to eventually retire there with his grandchildren.

Dornan angrily lashed out at House Republicans, calling their efforts to recruit Issa "loathsome."

"More betrayal!" Dornan said. "These guys were supposed to be my friends. It's disgusting. If it's a 'block Dornan' effort, it's driven by guilt that they left me to twist in the wind in 1998, giving me no chance to make a comeback. This is a breathtaking betrayal."

House Members have sought to lure Issa into the race by assuring him they would try to provide him with a unanimous endorsement of the state's GOP House delegation. One possible holdout could be Rep. Duncan Hunter (R), who strongly disagrees with Issa on trade issues.

Issa, a social and fiscal conservative, spent \$13 million of his own money in a 1998 Senate bid and narrowly lost the GOP primary to then-state Treasurer Matt Fong. Issa, who has declined to challenge Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D) in 2000, lives in Packard's Orange County-based 48th district and his car-alarm company, Directed Electronics Inc., is based there.

Issa has worked hard this year to maintain the network of GOP allies he created during that race. Following his defeat in the Senate primary, Issa became president of the San Diego County Lincoln Club, the party's unofficial fundraising

machine for local candidates.

"Darrell would clearly be one of the most formidable candidates we could have for Congress anywhere in California," said Shawn Steel, vice chairman of the California Republican Party.

The districts held by Rohrabacher and Packard are solid Republican seats that Democrats are unlikely to contest strongly. Packard never faced a competitive Democratic challenge in his 17 years in the House, and Bob Dole beat President Clinton by 22 points in Packard's district in 1996, his largest victory margin in California.

On Friday, Issa laid into Dornan, calling him a "poster boy for the party's extreme elements.

"It's not a question of whether a Democrat could win here, it's which Republican we elect, and safe seats do draw out extreme elements like Dornan," he said.

"I'll put all my energies into defeating Bob Dornan and making sure he loses resoundingly," Issa added. "He is what's wrong in our party because he goes out of his way to act like he's only interested in representing a small minority of the people. Bob Dornan is retired, and I want to work to keep him retired."

Another Republican being mentioned to succeed Packard is state Superior Court Judge Linda Wilde, who lost a 1994 challenge to then-Rep. George Brown (D) in the San Bernardino-based 42nd district by 996 votes. But Wilde, who declined GOP leaders' pleas to run in this year's special election to succeed Brown, is unlikely to run, sources said, and would not run as strongly as Issa.

Two term-limited state Assemblymen, Steve Baldwin (R) and Howard Kaloogian (R), and state Sen. Bill Morrow (R) also may run in the 48th district when Packard retires. Kaloogian commissioned a poll last month that showed he had 80 percent name recognition in his Assembly district, which shares several populous localities and the San Diego media market with Packard's House district.

"If there is an opening, I would certainly consider it," Kaloogian said.

[▲ back to top](#)

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