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In congressional district, Gillibrand wins praise from both sides of aisle

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KIRSTEN Gillibrand earned bipartisan accolades for her U.S. Senate appointment on Friday, especially in the heavily Republican congressional district where she is considered a Democratic hero for twice defeating GOP opponents.

Her appointment also left officials in Greene, Dutchess and Columbia counties — the local portion of the 20th Congressional District — waiting for word on when a special election will be held to fill Gillibrand's vacant House seat.

The 20th District comprises 10 counties and stretches from Hyde Park to the northern Adirondacks.

Richard Keaveny, the Republican supervisor in the Columbia County town of Canaan, said Gillibrand has represented agricultural areas well and has been able to work across party lines.

"People, if they feel you're the person for the job, it's not a Democratic or a party thing," Keaveny said. "(Columbia) County's strategy to get things going (economically) is something that she's supported. Anybody who gets in that congressional seat, whether they are Democrat or Republican, the same issues are still going to be out there, and we're going to still need them to provide help."

Gillibrand lives in the Columbia County town of Greenport.

Thomas Burke, the Democratic elections commission for Greene County, said information is being sought from the state on when a special election will be held to fill the 20th District seat.

"This is a congressional seat that has only a two-year term and has to be filled by special election within (30 to 40) days," Burke said. "We'll probably know next week when it will be."

Dutchess County Democratic Chairwoman Jane Barber Smith said it probably will take about three weeks for political bosses in the district to come up with candidates for the seat.

"We are trying at this point to come up with a schedule," Smith said. "There might be a

candidate or candidates coming from Dutchess. I think, in talking with the other county chairs, there are probably candidates coming from most of the counties, so it's going to be quite a task to narrow this down."

Cyndy Hall, vice chairwoman of the Columbia County Democratic Party, said learning Gillibrand was moving from the House to the Senate was a "bittersweet moment" because the Democrats finally had found someone who could win and hold the seat in the 20th Congressional District after decades of Republican domination — first by Rep. Gerald Solomon, then Rep. John Sweeney.

"I think it's going to be a difficult job to replace her," Hall said.

Accolades for Gillibrand on Friday included a message from state Sen. James L. Seward, a Milford Republican whose district includes Greene County.

"Certainly, we need an upstate voice in Washington, especially considering the downstate origins of the governor, attorney general, comptroller, Assembly speaker and Senate majority leader," Seward said.

Seward said Gov. David Paterson, who appointed Gillibrand to succeed Hillary Rodham Clinton in the U.S. Senate, should be "commended for selecting an upstate congressional representative." Seward added, however, that he would have preferred the seat be filled by way of a special election.

U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-Hurley, whose congressional district abuts Gillibrand's, said in a prepared statement on Friday that "becoming a member of the U.S. Senate is an extraordinary honor, and I wish Kirsten Gillibrand the very best in her new role. There is a lot of work to be done, and I expect and know that she will do her very best to represent all New Yorkers as effectively as possible."

State Sen. John Bonacic, R-Mount Hope, said Gillibrand "has the reputation of a reformer and is personally familiar with suburban and rural issues — something lacking in our other statewide elected officials."

State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, a Democrat, said the new senator "will be (the) same kind of fighter" that Clinton was because "she knows Washington and she knows the struggles of New York families."

U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., said his new Senate colleague "knows what families go through to raise kids, have a career, and bring home the paycheck."

"Governor, the bottom line is this: With this choice, you hit the nail on the head," Schumer said.

Larry Bulman, chairman of the Saratoga County Democratic Committee, said Paterson made the right choice in appointing Gillibrand.

“There’s no one that works harder than her in our congressional delegation, and she is a tireless advocate for the veterans, working families and farmers,” Bulman said.

Washington County Board of Supervisors Chairman Donald Wilbur, a Republican, also said Paterson got it right.

“I’m just glad we’ve got an upstate person,” Wilbur said. “She’ll be a watchdog for upstate.”

Freda Solomon, the late Rep. Solomon’s wife, congratulated Gillibrand on her appointment but expressed optimism that Republicans will regain her husband’s former seat in the 20th Congressional District.

“I’m impressed with Kirsten Gillibrand and the record she has in Congress over the last two years,” Mrs. Solomon said. “I’m sure she’ll be a fine U.S. senator. ... I was sad to see us (the GOP) lose the congressional seat, but there are reasons we did. Now we’ve got a chance to get it back.”

Gerald Solomon served 10 two-year terms in the House.

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