

# Drive to recall Denham Not Just About the Budget

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*The Sacramento Bee* Published Tuesday, April 15, 2008  
Story appeared Front Page section, Page A1

His name doesn't appear on the ballot, but state Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata is the indisputable driving force behind the recall of Sen. Jeff Denham, the first of a California legislator since 1995.

Ostensibly, the Democratic leader's effort to unseat a Republican who was easily re-elected in 2006 stems from last year's 53-day state budget stalemate. Denham joined his GOP colleagues in voting against the spending plan.



**But beyond the bad blood over the budget, a successful recall would move Democrats, who hold a commanding 25-15 lead in the Senate, to within one vote of being able to pass a budget and raise taxes without a Republican vote.**

"Besides pure vindictiveness, what's obvious is (Perata) is making an attempt to see if he can get a veto-proof state Senate," said Allan Hoffenblum, editor of the California Target Book, which tracks legislative races.

Recalls are rare in California. Denham is only the ninth state-level officeholder to face such a vote. The Central Valley lawmaker argues that the process "was never meant to intimidate or pressure somebody" into taking a position, and should be used only in cases of "extreme malfeasance." Democrats made similar complaints about Republicans who launched the 2003 recall of Gov. Gray Davis. But state law allows recalls for any reason, and now Democrats are mounting one against a Republican.

## Few competitive seats

Denham's 12th Senate District, which stretches from Stanislaus County to Merced and across the coastal range to Monterey, is an inviting target. It has more registered Democrats (46 percent) than Republicans (36 percent).

There are only a few competitive seats in the Senate; another is the seat being vacated by Sen. Tom McClintock, R-Thousand Oaks. If the June 3 Denham recall succeeds, Hoffenblum said, Democrats need only to pick off McClintock's seat to achieve their goal.

Perata and his political consultant, Sandi Polka, declined to be interviewed for this story. But the Senate president has previously portrayed Denham as a one-time moderate who moved to the right – including voting against the budget – to bolster his standing with conservatives in preparation for running for lieutenant governor in 2010.

Paul Hefner, a spokesman for the Dump Denham campaign, which received \$300,000 from committees associated with Perata to gather signatures for the recall, does not dispute Democratic registration in the district puts Denham in a precarious position.

"It's certainly a place where if you campaign as one thing – as a guy who's not a party ideologue (and) not afraid to cross bipartisan lines – and then you don't do it, there are folks out there who are going to be ticked off," Hefner said.

Denham, who ran an agricultural recycling business before he was elected to the Legislature in 2002, maintains he has not changed his political stripes. "I vote independently, based on what I feel are the needs of my district," he said.

He rejects the possibility that Perata is simply trying to expand the number of Democrats in his house. Denham noted that he parted with his GOP colleagues in 2003 when he worked with Perata to help bail out the financially strapped Oakland Unified School District – which is in Perata's district – and most recently to try to close a tax loophole on yachts. Denham said that until the budget stalemate, he got along well with Perata, sharing an occasional beer and even dining with his wife, Sonia, at Perata's home. At Perata's behest, Denham said, he hired Polka's sister, Melanie Regan, to work in his office.

"The bottom line is this is about the budget," Denham said of the recall. Denham contends Perata "retaliated" because he would not be "bullied" into voting for a budget that added to the state deficit.

### **Governor assails recall bid**

Because of his intransigence, Denham also incurred the wrath of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. During the budget stalemate, the governor campaigned in the senator's district to urge his constituents to put the heat on him. But last week, during a public appearance in Sacramento, the Republican governor called the recall "ludicrous."

"(Denham) served his community really well, and I think he believed a certain way when it comes to the budget," said Schwarzenegger, who swept into office when Gov. Gray Davis was recalled. Hefner said that "absent a (recall) effort like this, there are no consequences for Republicans going out there and saying, 'I'm for schools, I'm trying to solve problems' ... and then turning around and doing exactly the opposite."

In the recall election, voters will be asked whether Denham should be removed from office. If the majority say yes, then Monterey County Supervisor Simon Salinas – a former Democratic assemblyman and the only replacement candidate on the ballot – would succeed Denham.

Because there are three television markets in the sprawling district – Sacramento, Fresno and Salinas/Monterey – the race is likely to cost millions of dollars. Denham estimates he'll need \$3.5 million and expects to be outspent 2-to-1.

Among the prime beneficiaries will be Denham's political consultant, Wayne Johnson, and Polka, whose firm has prospered because of her business association with Perata.

"That's something that a lot of people find very curious," said Kevin Spillane, a spokesman for Denham. Asked if that could be another reason for the recall, Hefner said no.

Not since 1995, when Republicans recalled GOP Assembly members Doris Allen and Paul Horcher for voting with Democrats, has a member of the Legislature been driven out of office.

While qualifying a recall is rare – only nine of 120 attempts have been successful, according to the Secretary of State's Office – beating the challenge at the ballot is more difficult.

Only three of the eight targets before Denham have emerged victorious. Denham warns that if he is recalled, "Every Republican and every Democrat in a target seat should be concerned."