

Optimism, but no certainty, over Giffords' future

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Rep. Gabrielle Giffords sits in a car with her husband Mark Kelly as she leaves the U.S. Capitol after she appeared on the House floor to vote on debt legislation in Washington Aug. 1. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Gabrielle Giffords' surprising and emotional return to Congress sparked a new wave of speculation about 2012, but her political future is no clearer now than it was before she walked in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The congresswoman's staff was quick to contradict the rumors and erroneous news stories that she had decided to seek reelection. And friends and colleagues from Tucson say they're not making any assumptions about her plans as she continues her arduous recovery from the gunshot wound to the head that she suffered in a Jan. 8 assassination attempt.

Giffords spokesman CJ Karamargin said the congresswoman hasn't made a decision yet about the 2012 race. When

asked if there was a timetable for Giffords to make a decision, Karamargin only noted that the deadline for candidates to file their nominating petitions is in May.

"There will be plenty of time to weigh political considerations," he said.

Even the return to Congress may not be full-time, at least not for now. Giffords' decision on Monday to vote on the contentious debt ceiling bill "was something of an exception" because of her frustration over the weeks of gridlock on an issue that she has focused on for the length of her congressional career, Karamargin said. She insisted on going to the Capitol because it was the most important vote of the year, he said.

"Right now, members of Congress, if they haven't already left Washington, they're on their way out, they're going back to their districts, they're going on vacation, they're going to the beach," Karamargin said the day after the vote. "Gabby's going back to rehab. She is going back to five, six, seven-hour days of physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy."

The conjecture over Giffords' reelection odds – and even the possibility that she would run for the U.S. Senate – began soon after the shooting that left six dead and 12 others wounded outside a grocery store in Tucson. The consensus was that the combination of sympathy and popularity would make the centrist Democrat nearly impossible to beat.

But after months of rising optimism over the pace of Giffords' recovery, her chief of staff, Pia Carusone, delivered a reality check. In a June interview with *The Arizona Republic*, Carusone said Giffords still struggled to communicate and would often get frustrated with her inability to find the words she was looking for.

Karamargin said the images of Giffords on the U.S. House of Representatives floor – shaking hands, talking with colleagues, giving hugs – speak for themselves in terms of her recovery. But he wouldn't say how well Giffords understood the details of the complex bill she voted on. He would only say that Giffords was driven by the same frustration that many Americans shared over the debt ceiling crisis.

"Last week when the discussion in Washington hit one of the many brick walls it had hit