

## 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



repeatedly throughout this entire ordeal, Gabby turned to Mark and said 'They should just get it done,'" he said. "She has been following this thing closely enough to be irritated by it, and that's why she went to Washington."

But some who are close to Giffords said her decision to fly to Washington, D.C. was they sign they've been waiting for – not necessarily a sign that she's ready for the rigors of the campaign trail or the daily grind of Congress, but a sign that the Giffords they know and love is still there.

Rep. Matt Heinz, D-Tucson, said Giffords' staff wasn't enthusiastic about her decision to go to Washington, but she insisted on it anyway.

"When I heard that she basically told people what's what ... that tells me a lot. That means the old Gabby is alive and well," Heinz said.

Heinz said more and more people were assuming that Giffords wouldn't run for reelection, especially after Carusone's candid assessment of her recovery. Her return is a reason for optimism, but Heinz said Giffords' supporters should heed Karamargin and Carusone's insistence that the congresswoman hasn't made a decision yet.

"I'm trying to not read anything into it either, as exciting as it is to see her, especially with my background in medicine," said Heinz, a physician. "Not that I'm downplaying the significance of what we just saw, what we don't know is ... how she is in terms of having a conversation about a high-level topic in a debate format or doing interviews or that kind of situation."

And Sen. Linda Lopez, a close friend of Giffords, said the congresswoman's return to Congress was a great sign for her recovery, but wasn't sure it was an omen that she would be on the ballot next November.

"I think that's probably up in the air at this point in time," said Lopez, D-Tucson, who roomed with Giffords for five years when they were in the Legislature together. "I will support Gabby no matter what she decides to do. I love Gabby for Gabby, not because she's a congresswoman."

Others weren't so hesitant to declare that Giffords is back and ready for 2012. Lobbyist Mario Diaz said he's urged Democrats for months to "look at Plan B" in case Giffords couldn't run. Now, he's not so sure they need one.

"I would think that exploratory committees should probably fold, because I believe after yesterday that Gabby will continue to represent that district for quite some time," Diaz said.

Tucson Democrat George Cunningham said there are a lot of unknowns about Giffords' health – too many to jump to any conclusions about her ability to campaign for a fourth term. But the fact that she went to Congress for her first vote since the shooting should be enough to convince would-be candidates to back off.

"I think it's kind of a message that says, 'Hold your horses, here. I'm not out of this office and I'm not out of this race,'" he said. "They'd better shift into a lower gear."

Republican Sen. Frank Antenori, a candidate in the GOP primary for Giffords' seat in 2006, has been openly considering a run for months. But he has been clear that he would only run if Giffords doesn't. And after Giffords' return, he said he believes she'll probably stay in the race, especially considering the pressure she'll probably face from Democrats who are eager to hold onto her southern Arizona-based seat.

She'll be hard to beat, Antenori said. Even if she didn't have an outpouring of sympathy from the shooting, she would have been a tough challenge for any Republican.

But if and when she hits the campaign trail, he said, Giffords will have to answer a lot of the questions that people are asking today about whether she's capable of fully carrying out her duties as a member of Congress.

"I think that will be something that comes out during the campaign, if somebody runs against her," Antenori said. But, he added, "The name recognition and the plight that she faced ... is going to be too much for anyone to overcome."