Little-known House leader plays major role in debates

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In the bitter battle over Louisiana’s budget and taxes, Republicans who control the House are led by an Alexandria lawmaker who has emerged as a key player in what passes and what fails in the Legislature.

Rep. Lance Harris, 56, a foe of tax hikes and what he views as out-of-control government spending, is chairman of the House Republican delegation.

He played a huge role in staking out the chamber’s controversial positions on the $29 billion operating budget and contributed to the deaths of efforts to revamp the state’s tax system and the push to raise the state gas tax by up to $310 million per year.

Harris’ clout has led some insiders to argue that he and House Appropriations Committee Chairman Cameron Henry, R-Metaire, wield more influence than low-key House Speaker Taylor Barras, R-New Iberia.

“Together they pretty much control the narrative,” said House Democratic Caucus Chairman Gene Reynolds, D-Dubuque.

Harris calls comments like those of Reynolds ridiculous.

He contends controversy over the House’s stance on key money issues, usually at odds with Gov. John Bel Edwards and Senate leaders, stems from the fact that House leaders are no longer named and controlled by the governor.

“The difference now is an independent House, which is one thing the delegation has strived for since I have been here,” he said.

Critics are less charitable, and they say the lawmaker is part of a dysfunctional House leadership team unable to craft solutions to unrelenting state financial problems.

Harris arrived at the Legislature in 2012, and the fact he even sought the office caught some off guard.

“It was a little bit of a surprise and ‘Wow, really?’” recalled friend Reldon Owens, director of external relations for Diamond J Construction in Alexandria.

At the time, Harris was best known as the owner of a chain of Leebo’s convenience stores and food courts, which feature fresh fried chicken “cooked to perfection” using a 40-year-old family recipe. But an open house event was drawing little attention in 2011, and the deadline for qualifying was just days away.

“I had always been interested,” he recalled. Harris won the race and quickly showed his conservative views when he arrived in Baton Rouge for the first time since a fifth-grade school visit to the State Capitol. He jumped into the push by the House’s “fiscal hawks” to force then Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal to change what critics called deceptive budgeting practices.

“He was very interested in budget reform,” said former state Rep. Brett Geymann, a Lake Charles Republican who led the effort.

On another hot-button topic, Harris traveled to Oklahoma City with colleagues to visit lawmakers there to learn more about the fight against Common Core, the long-debated overhaul of math and English standards in public schools.

And when the job of caucus chairman became vacant less than a year into his term, Harris ran and won, unusual for a new member.

“He came out of the gate pretty fast as a freshman,” Geymann said.

Since then, Harris has staked out a series of conservative positions on issues that lawmakers of both parties say reflect his central Louisiana House district.

He opposed Medicaid expansion, backed a bill to ban pay-raise deduction for teacher unions and helped write the first law in the nation to make it a hate crime to attack a police officer.

This year he won approval for legislation aimed at punishing those who shout down controversial speakers on college campuses.

Last year, Harris won a full term as leader of the 61-member GOP caucus, and the House has been at war with Edwards and Senate leaders since then on how to solve Louisiana’s recurring budget problems.

That relationship hit bottom June 8, when more than $28 billion operating budget bill died on the House floor over the House leadership’s differences with the governor and Senate on how and how much to set aside in state spending for future shortfalls.

The failed budget strategy — force the state to set aside money for future shortfalls — had the names of Harris and others written all over it.

“Every negotiation I have ever been in he has been in,” Reynolds said. “It is a major player in the budget.”

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Eric LaFleur, D-Ville Platte, said Harris is a regular presence in leadership money talks and “speaks with some sense of authority that he has votes behind him. Obviously that is correct.”

Edwards called the budget collapse in the final moments of the regular session an epic failure and, without naming names, clearly blamed House leaders.

Harris and Barras — Henry was out of town — suffered a stinging defeat Wednesday, when first 10 and then 13 Republicans defected and sided with the governor and the Senate’s position in key votes on the final version of the operating budget.

That vote could pave the way for the special session to end on Friday.

Harris was born and grew up in Pineville, which is near Alexandria. His parents had been Southern Baptist medical missionaries in China.

The lawmaker studied piano at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, a sharp contrast to a good ole boy person that makes him popular with House Republicans and Democrats alike, despite sharp policy differences.

“We fight an awful lot on the floor, but we can walk off the floor and leave it on the floor,” said Rep. Katrina Jackson, of Monroe, one of the most outspoken Democrats in the chamber.

Rep. Sam Jones, D-Franklin, who also differs with Harris on key budget issues, said he considers the Republican a friend and disagrees with colleagues who view Harris as sort of a bully. “As a leader, you can’t be a mushroom,” Jones said.

Harris owns nine convenience stores in the Alexandria area; Lance Harris Properties, which includes commercial real estate; and Woodside Pecan Farm, which includes a “few hundred” cattle and 5,700 trees.

What he does next politically is unclear. If he leaves the House, he could run for the seat that will be vacated by Sen. Gerald Long, R-Winnfield, in 2020.

Statewide offices are also a possibility.

In the Legislature, Harris is credited with playing a key role in killing long-shot efforts by Edwards and others to increase the state gas tax for the first time in 28 years.

Rep. Jim Morris, R-Oil City, was expected to sponsor a $10 million hike, and the governor’s allies were all but sure it was coming. But Morris dropped those plans after a GOP caucus in Alexandria before the session, and lawmakers at the event said Harris and Henry urged Morris not to bring the bill.

Harris said that, while the Republican delegation did not have an official stance, he opposed any increase in the gas tax. “My district wasn’t for it,” he said.