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Photos by JOE PUGLIESE / Los Angeles Times

Challenger Walter Holden Capps, a Democrat and UC Santa Barbara professor, lost last election by less than 1%.

CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS 22nd CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Race Becomes Test of GOP's '94 Ascension

■ Rep. Andrea Seastrand holds to conservative stance. In tight race, Democrats look to strong challenger Walter Capps to wage a benchmark battle on key issues.

By BOB SIPCHEN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

SAN LUIS OBISPO—If Hollywood were planning a docudrama on the rise and possible fall of Congress' freshman Republican class, the 22nd Congressional District would be the place to shoot it.

In 1994, Republican Andrea Seastrand tapped into America's conservative groundswell and beat Democrat Walter Holden Capps by a mere 1,563 votes, or less than 1% of the total in this district that sprawls on the Central Coast from the Monterey County border down to Summerland.

Now, with the Republican revolution in apparent retreat, national interest groups—primarily on the pro-Democratic side—have poured tens of thousands of dollars into the district to try to make it a benchmark battle on such issues as abortion, education and the environment. Seastrand has received backing from a number of conservative interest groups, but their effort has been less visible.

With more than a month left in the campaign, the candidates are reeling from a hard-edged advertising blitzkrieg. And no letup is likely, because the first independent poll of the campaign, released this week, shows



Rep. Andrea Seastrand has the backing of business and anti-tax groups.

Seastrand leading Capps by only one percentage point—a dead heat statistically.

It was probably inevitable that Seastrand's race would become a heated showdown on the fate of the freshman class.

On the campaign trail two years ago, Seastrand fully embraced the socially conservative moment, suggesting in one speech that God might be flashing warning signs to sinful Californians: "Floods, drought, fires,

earthquakes, lifting mountains two feet high in Northridge."

In Washington, Seastrand, 55, promptly established herself as a key backer of House Speaker Newt Gingrich and the "contract with America." Even now, she refuses to spurn the speaker, despite conventional wisdom that he has become a political albatross.

Capps has been equally loyal to Bill Clinton during the president's swings

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in the popularity polls. A religious studies professor at UC Santa Barbara, he is the author of a book that critiques Christian conservatives' political activism, and he portrays himself as a rational crusader against Seastrand's "extreme" stands.

The result is a race that offers one of the country's clearest ideological choices.

"At a time when most of the country has expressed disappointment with the work of the 104th Congress," the 62-year-old Capps said at Monday night's debate, "she has the gall to run on that record."

Seastrand shows no signs of backing down. "My constituents voted for me because of the stands I took," she said.

Capps recites a litany of Seastrand-backed program cuts he would not have supported, including congressional efforts to reduce funds for such education programs as Headstart and Goals 2000, for the Clean Water Act and the Environmental Protection Agency, for national parks, for family planning clinics and for AIDS research.

"With all due respect, she and I see the world very differently," he said.

For her part, Seastrand began the debate before the San Luis Obispo Medical Society by talking about the buckets of ice she and her fellow freshmen representatives found outside their offices each morning when they arrived in Washington.

Scrapping the program that delivered that free ice—a congressional perk since 1909—symbolized the GOP Congress' disciplined effort to reduce the size of government, she said.

If high contrast political stakes would not be enough to maintain interest, the race also offers its share of "Olympic moment"-style pathos.

Seastrand, the mother of two, first ran for political office six years ago, jumping into a state Assembly race when her husband Eric, the incumbent, died of cancer.

And in May, as Capps and his wife, Lois, returned home from a campaign appearance, a drunk driver swerved into their lane on rural California 154, leaving the candidate hospitalized with broken bones and other injuries. The father of three grown children, Capps limped back onto the campaign trail full time last month.

Seastrand tends to portray Capps as an ivory tower liberal, disconnected from the way most people live.

Discussing Seastrand, Capps sounds like a professor exasperated by a dim student who has somehow managed to win over the class. He is particularly impatient with the incumbent's unwillingness to let go of the rhetorical issues that served so many Republicans so well in 1994.

"I think we're suffering through a period of pretty heavy collective paranoia," Capps said Monday.

Seastrand's conservatism has made her a high-profile target. And she is seen as particularly vulnerable, given that this is a traditional swing district, evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans.

James Wagoner, a vice president with the National Abortion Rights Action League, says that for months his organization has been mailing literature, sponsoring events and going door to door to

tell Seastrand's constituents that "she is so out of step with their views on right-to-choose issues."

Likewise, the AFL-CIO has aired advertisements in the district highlighting Seastrand's support of Republican efforts to change Medicare.

Perhaps the most aggressive campaign has been on the environmental front.

For the first time in California, the Sierra Club has launched an independent expenditure campaign, targeted at Seastrand.

Bruce Hamilton, the club's national conservation director, cites a confluence of factors, strategic and ideological, for the unusual decision to invest time and money in an education campaign highlighting Seastrand's environmental record.

"It's a combination of her being so bad on the environment, the district being so pro-environment, her margin of victory being so narrow, and her opponent being extremely good on the environment," he said.

Unencumbered by spending restrictions imposed on groups that are directly contributing to a candidate, the Sierra Club has spent \$50,000 in the 22nd District and is raising additional funds.

Although no groups have yet intervened to that extent to support Seastrand's record, she is backed by business and anti-tax groups, local cattlemen's organizations and will almost certainly benefit from the Christian Coalition's planned distribution of voter guides before the election.

Eric Smith, the director of UC Santa Barbara's Washington Center in Washington, says the interest group input has had a predictable effect on the race.

"Normally, incumbents have an enormous advantage over any challenger, and Seastrand should be in a much better position than last time," he said.

Times staff writer Gabe Martinez

CONGRESS

Parties Draft Hit Lists of Opponents

With Congress about to complete its work for the year, both parties are refining their lists of who they see as top prospects for defeat.

What follows are each side's lists of the most vulnerable incumbents.

VULNERABLE REPUBLICANS

The National Republican Congressional Committee sees these incumbents as among the most vulnerable Democrats:

- Hawaii 1st District: Neil Abercrombie
- Illinois 17th District: Lane Evans
- Kentucky 3rd District: Mike Ward
- Michigan 10th District: David E. Bonior
- Missouri 9th District: Harold L. Volkmer
- N.Y. 26th District: Maurice D. Hinchey
- Oregon 1st District: Elizabeth Furse
- Texas 25th District: Ken Bentsen
- Utah 3rd District: Bill Orton
- Vermont At Large: Bernard Sanders (an independent)

VULNERABLE DEMOCRATS

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee sees these incumbents as among the most vulnerable Republicans:

- Calif. 22nd District: Andrea Seastrand
- Idaho 1st District: Helen Chenoweth
- Ill. 5th Dist.: Michael Patrick Flanagan
- Maine 1st District: James B. Longley Jr.
- Michigan 8th District: Dick Chrysler
- Nevada 1st District: John Ensign
- N.C. 2nd District: David Funderburk
- N.C. 4th District: Frederick K. Heineman
- New York 4th District: Daniel Frisa
- Ohio 10th District: Martin R. Hoke
- Ohio 6th District: Frank A. Cremeans
- Oregon 5th District: Jim Bunn
- Texas 9th District: Steve Stockman

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Times staff writer Gebe Martinez contributed to this story.