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Friends, colleagues stunned by "tragic loss"

By Carol Roberts and Jamie Hurly
Telegram-Tribune

SLO COUNTY - State Sen. Jack O'Connell and fellow Democrat Walter Capps had been friends for more than 20 years. O'Connell choked back tears shortly after learning of the congressman's death Tuesday evening.



"I am absolutely stunned," said O'Connell. "We were very close. We talked a lot -- every week on issues affecting our district. We really worked well together. We've been to each other's houses."

O'Connell said his heart goes out to Lois Capps and the Capps' children. "What a tremendous loss."

He believes Capps will be missed by everyone. "He loved his job and worked so hard to attain that job. He loved serving an area he loved and had lived in for three decades."

The state senator also said Capps was easily the most popular professor at UCSB with students and faculty alike.

"He has helped so many people for so long. It is a loss to our entire community," said O'Connell. "Everyone liked Walter."

The suddenness of the death also surprised San Luis Obispo County Supervisor Harry Ovitt, who is president of the California State Association of Counties.

"I don't think anybody was thinking about a health issue when he was back there," Ovitt said. The only indication of any health problem was the spring 1996 automobile accident, he said. Capps was seriously injured when his car was struck by a drunken driver.

"The family has been through a lot with the auto accident," Ovitt said. "It hasn't been easy on them. My condolences go out to the family."

Ovitt praised Capps for immersing himself in his job as a congressman and for being a bipartisan politician. "I think we've been fortunate with him, O'Connell and (Assemblyman Tom) Bordonaro in that they work together on the issues that affect us. He's been there to try to help as best he could."

Capps worked with local officials on transportation issues and tried to improve cooperation with federal agencies, Ovitt said.

"It's a tragic loss," said San Luis Obispo Mayor Allen Settle. "He'll be greatly missed."

Settle commended Capps for his recent efforts to streamline the

process for cities and counties to get permits from the Army Corps of Engineers to do creek repairs in advance of El Nino.

"Walter did a wonderful job to help us get some permits through the Army Corps of Engineers. I'm very grateful."

Geoffrey Land, director of the Environmental Center of San Luis Obispo, said Capps was philosophically committed to environmental issues.

"He was on his way to accomplishing a lot," said Land. "He was working on getting funding for Morro Bay, park user fee issues and securing the Carrisa Plains as a permanently protected area. He had a lot of ideas." Capps had a full agenda of environmental programs and solutions he was working on, Land said. "Unfortunately, the future of some of these projects is now uncertain."

Land said he met with Capps several times but didn't get to know him personally. "But I think he had a real genuine soft-spoken approach that would have gone a long way in dealing with some of the polarized land-use positions and environmental challenges we have on the Central Coast."

Capps, Land added, seemed genuinely interested in coming up with community-based and environmentally sensitive solutions to problems.

"This is a tragedy for his district as well as his family."

San Luis Coastal school Superintendent Edwin Denton said Capps was a strong ally when it came to educating kids.

"Walter Capps was for public education," said Denton, who talked occasionally with the congressman about issues. "We had a good working relationship. I found him to be someone I could relate to easily. It would have been a pleasure to know him personally."


Capps' first term indicated he was following up on his campaign promises, said Denton. "I liked the direction he was taking."

Denton, a supporter during Capps' campaign, said he is concerned for the family. "The shock of losing someone that way is always traumatic. I am so sorry."

County Democratic Central Committee member Marty U'Ren of Atascadero was working by himself at the Democratic Party headquarters in San Luis Obispo late Tuesday afternoon when the news came in.

"I think that the tragedy of his loss is particularly acute for Democrats in this district, but I think time will show it is a loss for all voters of this district," he said.

Published Oct. 29, 1997

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...according to a life partner, ...

...to Christus Reston Hospital Center in ... according to The Associated Press. He was ... by his wife, Lois Capps.

... congressman was returning to Washington ... as the House prepared to vote on a defense ... and other issues Tuesday afternoon.

Capps had attended the season-opening performance of the San Luis Obispo County Symphony on Saturday night at the ... Arts Center, where he was introduced along with his ...

The next evening, the couple attended St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Arroyo Grande.

Capps defeated Republican incumbent Andrea Seastrom last November in a rematch of their 1994 race, when Seastrom squeaked out a slim victory in Capps' first foray into election politics. Capps won handily in 1996 following a bitter and expensive campaign for a seat coveted by national leaders of both parties.

Once in office, Capps spent his first year in the House focused primarily on education and human rights issues.

A scholar who authored 14 books, Capps unabashedly spoke of education as a balm for many of society's ills. "I think education is almost the answer to everything," he repeatedly said during his two campaigns.

Capps also spoke passionately of mending partisan wounds.

"I like to get people on both sides of an issue to agree to stay in the room and talk it out together. That's democratic government," he said last week during an interview with the Telegram-Tribune.