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McCollum joins reform panel

Temporary move puts St. Paul congresswoman in debates over Iraq**BY TOM WEBB****Washington Correspondent**

U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum joined a congressional panel that investigates government waste, fraud and abuse and spent her first day there Tuesday in a partisan battle over Iraq reconstruction contracts and Halliburton.

McCollum, D-St. Paul, joined the House Government Reform Committee at the request of House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, who has previously helped McCollum advance in the congressional hierarchy. The temporary move means McCollum will leave the Resources Committee, which had been a favorite of her predecessor, the late Rep. Bruce Vento, D-St. Paul.

"We did not pursue this, we did not request it. It was not even remotely on her radar, but this was at the request of the leader and we're going to do the work we were asked to do," said Bill Harper, McCollum's chief of staff.

Government Reform, even more than most House committees, is deeply riven along partisan lines. During the Clinton administration, it became famed for its long-running investigations into the Clinton White House — issuing more than 1,000 subpoenas to members of the administration. Its investigative zeal has evaporated and, as of January, not a single full committee subpoena had been issued for anyone in the Bush White House.

"When the Republicans ran the Congress and Clinton was in the White House, there was no accusation too small for them to pursue," Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., has complained. "Now that President Bush is in power, there's no scandal so large that they have any interest in examining it."

Yet the committee structure gives House Democrats some rare investigative powers, and lately they've been using them to some effect. The panel's Democrats recently unmasked a faulty terrorism report that the Bush administration portrayed as a triumph and which was later shown to have flawed numbers, prompting Secretary of State Colin Powell to call it all a "big mistake."

The panel's Democrats also are investigating the source of abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, the misrepresented costs of the new Medicare prescription drug plan and the marketing of prescription drug cards.

Said Harper, "They're looking for people who are going to be tough, hard-hitting and determined to get to the bottom of things, whether it's Halliburton, whether it's the torture, whether it's the CIA leaks out of the White House — these are all things this committee will be looking at in the coming months."

The panel's Republicans, meanwhile, are pressing ahead on their own agenda, including reducing government paperwork, addressing the backlog of immigrant visas and supporting alternatives to public schools that fail.

At least \$1 billion has been wasted in Iraq rebuilding, auditor says.

Tom Webb can be reached at 202-383-6049 or twebb@krwashington.com.

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