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Thomas Suozzi faces early frustrations in Congress

May 14, 2017 By Paul LaRocco paul.larocco@newsday.com



Rep. Thomas Suozzi (D-Glen Cove), at the U.S. Capitol on April 26, 2017, is adjusting to the frustrations of being a minority-party freshman congressman. (Credit: Sandy Schaeffer Hopkins)

WASHINGTON — As Nassau County executive, Thomas Suozzi oversaw a workforce of nearly 10,000. If he had an idea, it usually became a reality.

“I was the boss. I’d sit around and say, ‘You do this, you do this,’” said Suozzi, Long Island’s newest House member, as he hurriedly walked

the long halls of the Capitol on a recent afternoon, late to a meeting with environmentalists that had started without him.

“Now I’m like, ‘Guys?’” Suozzi said, shifting to a meeker tone of voice. “‘Maybe we can do this?’”

Suozzi’s victory last fall in the 3rd Congressional District restarted a political career that had stalled since 2009, when he lost his third-term bid for county executive to Republican Edward Mangano by just 386 votes. (Mangano then easily beat him in a 2013 rematch.)

But instead of returning to an executive post — all Suozzi had ever known in public service — the former Glen Cove mayor and 2006 gubernatorial candidate is adjusting to the frustrations of life as just another freshman deep in the Democratic minority.

He can’t simply introduce legislation and see it passed. His statements on the issues of the day don’t automatically make news.

So to try to make good on his campaign slogan, “Suozzi Gets It Done!”, he has taken a somewhat unusual tack for a Democrat in the politically polarized era of President Donald Trump: Reaching across the aisle.

Suozzi, 54, has joined regular bipartisan groups at the House gym and at prayer breakfasts. And he has appeared on Fox News to promote one of his top priorities, the House “Problem Solvers Caucus,” of which he is a vice chairman. The 22 Democrats and 22 Republicans in the caucus are attempting to form a bloc to deliver key votes for tax reform or infrastructure spending, two issues where they see the best potential for compromise.

That outreach, he said, helped him get a meeting with Rep. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.), chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, to discuss the Northport VA hospital in Suozzi’s North Shore district. Roe plays guitar at the prayer breakfast.

"These kinds of interactions really do make a difference in working together in Washington," Roe said of meeting Suozzi at the breakfast.

Suozzi said he also hopes to become a co-sponsor of a bill that would limit the length of initial opioid prescriptions. The expected lead sponsor, Rep. Martha McSally (R-Ariz.), is in Suozzi's workout group.

Though standing firmly with Democrats in opposing GOP priorities such as overhaul of the Affordable Care Act — he joined the other 192 Democrats in voting against the bill this month — and rolling back environmental regulations, Suozzi's moderation has put him at odds with progressives who are thirsty for full-throated resistance to the Trump/Republican agenda.

"In a lot of ways we've been extremely disappointed with Tom Suozzi," said Ron Widelec, a steering committee member of Long Island Activists, a group formed by supporters of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential bid. "He represents the old guard of the Democratic Party, and this is why they're losing across the board."

Widelec noted that Suozzi supported Trump's airstrikes on Syria last month, and opposes a single-payer health care system if it requires new taxes.

"He's just not a progressive," Widelec said.

During an interview in his office at the Cannon House Office Building — where portraits of John F. Kennedy and Theodore Roosevelt hang — Suozzi dismissed such criticism.

"I'm not just going to come here and rant and be against everybody and fight everybody," he said. "I want to get things done. So I need to build new relationships."

Far-left Democrats nationwide have begun considering primary challenges to more centrist House members next year, although no one has declared interest in Suozzi's seat.

The National Republican Congressional Committee, meanwhile, has already named Suozzi as one of its targets in 2018. Suozzi won his district, which covers northern Nassau and parts of Suffolk and Queens, by roughly six percentage points.

"I'm a little skeptical of the idea that he would be in a ton of trouble in a general election," Kyle Kondik of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics said of Suozzi. Kondik noted that in midterm elections such as next year's, "it's usually the president's party playing defense."

Ed Rollins, a Republican political strategist who ran Ronald Reagan's 1984 re-election campaign and last year headed a pro-Trump super PAC, said Suozzi's aim to work with Republicans could be a way to distinguish himself politically for future runs.

"My sense is it's an opportunity to get back in the game," Rollins said of Suozzi's House seat, "and he may think his best role is to try to be a bridge builder."

Rep. Peter King (R-Seaford) credited Suozzi with trying to be bipartisan, but called it a risky strategy.

"On one hand, there's this general feeling that Congress has to really work together — then when you truly try to do that, you're accused of being a traitor to your party and beliefs," said King, whom the nonprofit Lugar Center — a Washington, D.C. think tank formed by former Indiana Sen. Richard Lugar — and Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy recently named as the most bipartisan member of the House, based on sponsorship and cosponsorship of legislation.

"Both of those forces are very strong," King said. "The problem is, those who want bipartisanship aren't helped very much in a primary. So you don't stray from the party line."

During an afternoon of meetings and votes in April, Suozzi expressed little concern about the possibility of facing Democratic or Republican challengers next year. Instead, he said he was

focused on tasks including boosting the influence of the Problem Solvers Caucus to match that of the nearly three-dozen member Freedom Caucus, a group of conservative Republicans who in March were instrumental in blocking their party's first attempt to repeal Obamacare.

"We need to have everyone vote as a group," Suozzi said of the Problem Solvers. "That's why they're so powerful."

That day, Suozzi stopped in on a meeting of the House Long Island Sound Caucus, which focuses on protecting the waterway and others in the region. The seven-member group was hosting local environmentalists concerned that the federal spending bill then being considered would have no funding for local water quality protection.

Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-Shirley), who co-chairs the caucus with Suozzi and Connecticut Democrat Rosa DeLauro, was already there when Suozzi walked in. As Suozzi sat down, the environmentalists started to talk to him about the damage a funding cut would do.

Suozzi echoed their concerns and threw out several ideas for how the environmentalists could better publicize the importance of the federal funding.

But he acknowledged his power was limited.

"Lee's the guy here," Suozzi said, nodding toward Zeldin. "He's in the majority."

[< back to article](#)