

WASHINGTON

A Power Duo, Dingells Battle on Two Fronts

By JOHN M. BRODER NOV. 15, 2008

WASHINGTON — Things are a little tense in the Dingell household.

John is fighting to protect his job from an ambitious younger colleague. Debbie is battling to save her company from bankruptcy. John is recovering from major knee surgery. Debbie's mother has been seriously ill.

This is no ordinary family drama. Representative John D. Dingell of Michigan, the at-times-irascible Democratic chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, is trying to stave off a challenge to his chairmanship from Representative Henry A. Waxman, the anything-but-mellow California Democrat. Mr. Dingell's wife, Deborah Insley Dingell, is a senior executive at General Motors and a member of the family who founded the company.

At a time when they thought they would be quietly nursing Mr. Dingell back to health, celebrating the Democratic victory on Nov. 4 and helping the ailing auto industry, the Dingells find themselves in a nasty intramural brawl with Mr. Waxman.

One Dingell ally called it King Kong versus Godzilla.

The stakes are immense. Mr. Dingell, from Dearborn, Mich., is the American automobile industry's stoutest defender in Congress and has been the bane of

environmentalists on some issues for years, although he has helped shepherd a number of environmental bills through Congress. Mr. Waxman, who represents Beverly Hills and other wealthy areas of west Los Angeles, is a committed environmental voice and an advocate for a rapid overhaul of the auto industry.

The outcome of the fight for the leadership of the Energy and Commerce Committee, which has broad jurisdiction, could well determine the near-term fate of President-elect Barack Obama's energy, environmental and health care agendas. It carries heavy implications for Detroit, perhaps most urgently in the types of emissions and mileage standards the automakers would have to meet.

General Motors is rapidly running out of cash and appealing to Washington for a multibillion-dollar bailout to keep operating and continue the costly conversion to a leaner company producing efficient vehicles that people will buy. Mrs. Dingell, who gave up lobbying for G.M. when she married Mr. Dingell in 1981, is executive director for public affairs for G.M. and its most familiar face in Washington.

Mrs. Dingell, 54, known to everyone as Debbie, said she and her husband were stunned when Mr. Waxman called the day after the election to tell Mr. Dingell that he would try to snatch his chairman's gavel. Mr. Waxman did not go into detail with Mr. Dingell about the reasons for his challenge, but he has told allies that he believes he is better equipped than Mr. Dingell to push Mr. Obama's program through Congress.

A vote on the chairmanship is scheduled for this week, when members of Congress are in town for organizational meetings and possible work on an economic stimulus package.

Mr. Dingell is 82 and has served in Congress since 1955 and as chairman or ranking member of the Energy and Commerce Committee since 1981. In February he will become the longest-serving member in the history of the House. Mr. Waxman, 69, arrived in Congress as part of the Watergate class of 1974. He has made his name in recent years as a senior member and chairman of the House

Oversight and Government Reform Committee investigating war profiteering, steroids in baseball, Hurricane Katrina reconstruction and regulation of financial markets, among other things.

He has mounted a leadership challenge before, knocking off a far more senior Energy and Commerce subcommittee chairman in 1978.

Mr. Waxman and Mr. Dingell have had a testy relationship for years over matters of ideology, policy and legislative strategy.

The Dingells take this latest challenge personally.

“You could laugh or you could cry,” Mrs. Dingell said. “A whole lot of people didn’t want this to happen.”

She said she was not involved in the details of the campaign to protect Mr. Dingell’s chairmanship, although she rallied his defenders in the early days of the challenge and serves as part of his war council. She does not lobby Congress or the administration on G.M.’s behalf, but she makes the case for the company, the auto industry and the state of Michigan in public and in private. She is a descendant of the Fisher brothers, who founded the company that became General Motors 100 years ago, and is a member of the Democratic National Committee from Michigan.

The Dingells have four American-made automobiles, two of them hybrid sport utility vehicles. Mr. Waxman owns a Toyota Camry manufactured in Kentucky, a spokeswoman said.

Mr. Dingell has been on the telephone around the clock seeking votes to save his job. He asked his doctor to come to the Dingells’ townhouse in McLean, Va., last Saturday to remove the stitches from his Oct. 24 knee surgery so he would not have to spend two hours away from the phone.

He has enlisted lobbyists, union leaders and current and former government officials, including Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm of Michigan, to rally votes for him and has expressed confidence through a spokesman that he would beat back Mr.

Waxman.

Mr. Dingell and Mr. Waxman declined to be interviewed for this article.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Mr. Obama have remained neutral on the in-house battle. Ms. Pelosi has asked both men not to invoke her name in their fight.

Anita Dunn, a longtime aide to Mr. Dingell and one of Mrs. Dingell's best friends, said Democrats in Congress could be spending their time far more productively than taking sides in a bitter contest between two legendary lawmakers. She said she had no doubt that, whatever the outcome of the committee fight, the Dingells would persevere.

"You can't find two people who deal better with adversity," said Ms. Dunn, who served as a senior adviser to the Obama campaign. "And, frankly, you're not going to find two tougher people in Washington."

Mr. Waxman is no pushover, either. He is waging a vigorous campaign for the committee chairmanship, although not as publicly as Mr. Dingell. He issued a bland statement on Nov. 5 announcing his challenge and saying that the most important issues Congress would face — energy, climate change and health care — must move through the Energy and Commerce Committee. He said he was seeking the chairmanship because the committee would require "the very best leadership" to succeed.

Mr. Waxman's spokeswoman, Karen Lightfoot, would not elaborate on Mr. Waxman's reasons for trying to unseat Mr. Dingell or on his strategy to do so. "We're not interested in waging the campaign through the media," Ms. Lightfoot said.

The Waxman effort is led by Representative George Miller, a fellow California Democrat and Ms. Pelosi's closest ally in the House.

"I have worked with Henry Waxman for more than 30 years, since we came to Congress together in the class of '74," Mr. Miller said through a spokeswoman. "He

represents our best chance to help take Congress and the country into the future with policies we desperately need on energy, transportation, health care and in other critical areas.”

The auto companies, unions, environmental groups and other lobbies are “hiding under their desks,” said one lobbyist, for fear of backing the wrong horse. Even Ford Motor Company and General Motors — whose sympathies are hardly secret — declined to comment on the record on the Dingell-Waxman contest.

Some of these groups are urging the House leadership to head off the fight, saying it serves only to divide Democrats at a time when they need unity on efforts to revive the economy.

A few outsiders, however, are willing to speak up. Dan Becker, an environmental lobbyist who has spent 30 years trying to force Detroit to build cleaner and more fuel-efficient cars, said his single biggest obstacle in that time had been Mr. Dingell.

“It’s rare that you see this kind of a clash of the titans,” Mr. Becker said. “And one in which it is so clear who’s wearing the white hat and who’s wearing the black hat.”

Mr. Becker said that the tough legislation or bailout terms needed to get Detroit to change its ways were never going to come from an Energy and Commerce Committee led by Mr. Dingell.

“Mr. Dingell,” he said, “is literally married to General Motors.”

All members of Congress find these battles excruciating, but they are a particular challenge to the newest members who have no history with either contestant.

Kathy Dahlkemper, a newly elected Democratic House member from Erie, Pa., is one of them.

Her phone rang the day after she won her seat by beating an incumbent

Republican, Phil English. “Hi, this is Henry Waxman,” Ms. Dahlkemper said she heard. He explained who he was, what he was trying to do and why. A few hours later, Representative Mike Doyle, a Pittsburgh Democrat who is helping Mr. Dingell, called with a pitch for his man.

“That’s very interesting,” said Ms. Dahlkemper, who runs a landscaping business with her husband and has never held elective office. “All of this completely surprised me.”

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