South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Frankel uses break from Congress to explore constituents' concerns

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

9:22 PM EST, February 4, 2013

BOCA RATON

An hour for a crash course on hospital economics. Another hour learning what South Florida's ports and the tourism industry need to thrive. The time to listen to a high school freshman describe how he was harassed because of his sexual orientation.

Name the issue, and Lois Frankel has probably heard an earful about it during the last 10 days. With Congress on its first extended break after she took the oath of office on Jan. 3, Frankel has used the time for a seemingly nonstop tour of the Broward-Palm Beach County congressional district she was elected to represent in November.

The freshman Democrat's schedule – more than 30 public and private events – had her ranging all over the two counties from morning to night. From Jan. 24 through Friday, she racked up more than 550 miles hopscotching across the district, which encompasses coastal communities from the West Palm Beach area to Fort Lauderdale and extends westward through Plantation.

On Tuesday, for example, she started at 6:45 a.m., catching a Tri-Rail train near her West Palm Beach home to attend a breakfast meeting with leaders of the Broward Workshop, an organization of top business executives. She got home at 10 p.m. after a day of events that typically lasted an hour or more. Most of her activities during the last week and a half were similar – not quick drivebys to shake hands before dashing off to the next event.

It's a smart strategy, said Justin Sayfie, a Fort Lauderdale lawyer who served as communications director for former Republican Gov. Jeb Bush and now publishes the SayfieReview political news website. "It's what any savvy, newly elected official should do at the beginning of their term," he said.

"The first six months of any public officeholder's term are really the most important time period," Sayfie said. "That's when voters are having an opportunity to size up an elected official as an elected official and not as a candidate."

With terms lasting just two years, Florida Atlantic University political scientist Kevin Wagner said new members of the U.S. House of Representatives must quickly show voters what they're doing – and also start thinking about the next election.
"You get a couple of days rest and then you're back on the campaign trail," Wagner said.

Though she's a freshman congresswoman, Wagner said that as a former mayor of West Palm Beach and former member and Democratic leader of the Florida House of Representatives, Frankel, 64, knows what's required. "She doesn't have to learn on the job. She knows how to talk to her constituents and how to engage them," he said.

Frankel is by no means the only member of Congress working in her or his district during the congressional break. U.S. Reps. Ted Deutch, D-Boca Raton, and Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Weston, both held high-profile events last week dealing with gun violence. At an event in Lauderdale Lakes, Deutch called on the state to expand mental health coverage. In Oakland Park, Wasserman Schultz advocated expanded background checks for would-be gun buyers.

In addition to meetings with business and local government leaders, a classroom visit and a hospital tour, Frankel held roundtable discussions in Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach on gun violence.

Her approach, similar to the end of a neck-and-neck political campaign, may be paying dividends.

Andrew Frosch, youth group advocate at social services organization SunServe, was studying the congresswoman when she met with its gay youth group. "It was my perception that she actually cared. She asked questions – and made eye contact," he said.

One of the business leaders at the closed-door Broward Workshop breakfast with Frankel was the organization's chairman, Dr. Harry Moon, president of Himmarshee Surgical Partners and former chief executive officer of Cleveland Clinic Florida.

Moon described himself as lifelong Republican. "That being said, I was very impressed with the congresslady," he said. "She listened and there was no campaigning in the interchange that we had.... She was a very good listener, and the interaction was geared toward solving problems."

Frankel said her fellow passengers on Tri-Rail last week "all want[ed] to know why I'm not in Washington." Her response sounded more like a tea party conservative than a decades-long champion of liberal causes. "Sometimes less is better with government. I am not one of those who thinks that Congress needs to be in session 24 hours a day interfering in peoples' lives."

Time in the district will help her during Capitol Hill policy debates, Frankel said in an interview after touring Boca Raton Regional Hospital, where 67 percent of the patients rely on the Medicare to cover their bills and Washington talk of cutting the health program for seniors to help reduce the federal budget deficit isn't popular.

"Issues become much more real to me when I have stories back home. So when we talk about Medicare and [budget] sequestration and the proposed cuts to Medicare, I have a story now of this hospital where we were today and I can understand how the cuts in reality will affect the lives of patients that I saw today lying in the emergency room," Frankel said.
Frankel didn't hold any overtly political events last week, but between appearances she worked the phones to raise money for 2014, something Wagner said is a de facto job requirement. "Politicians who don't fundraise either lose or retire," he said.

Sayfie said it could be tough for Frankel to maintain her current pace. "The question I have is will we see the same level of activity 12 months from now," he said. "Is this just an early term burst of activity or is it something that is sustainable?"