

The Philadelphia Inquirer

June 12, 2009

Christie taps conservative to lead GOP

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Republican gubernatorial candidate Christopher J. Christie, noting the symbolism of the selection, yesterday named a conservative, 37-year-old freshman assemblyman to head the state party.

Jay Webber, a Harvard-educated lawyer from Morris Plains, is expected to get the state committee's nod Wednesday.

"Symbols are important in politics. Having a new young leader of the Republican State Committee is something I want the public to see and our party to see," said Christie, who is 46, at a Statehouse news conference. "We're turning a new page to a new day in New Jersey."

This was Christie's first act as the party's titular leader since winning the June 2 primary. It was seen by some as a way to unify the GOP after a tough primary pitted establishment Republicans against the party's right wing.

Webber turned heads when he ran as a staunch conservative against establishment-backed State Sen. Bob Martin in Morris County in 2003. After losing to Martin, Webber won an assemblyman seat in 2007.

Christie, asked if the move meant he was embracing conservatives, said, "It shows I'm embracing the whole party."

Webber joked he wanted to "commend Chris for his commitment to balancing out this party. This is a man who has Mets season tickets on the third-base line, and mine are on the first-base line."

But seriously, he said, "the people of New Jersey are hurting. We think that good policies and good government can help them. . . . While we are committed to winning, that is not an end in itself. We're here because we want our kids and our grandkids to live in a better state than we live in now."

Conservatives were pleased with the choice, with North Jersey political consultant Kevin Collins, who once worked for Webber, calling him "one of the brightest, most articulate spokesmen for the party. He's a principled Republican that all factions can trust and talk to."

But Rick Shaftan, political consultant to losing primary candidate Steve Lonegan, said he hoped the choice of a conservative to head the party didn't set up Christie to pick a less-conservative person as his lieutenant-governor candidate.

Rider University political scientist Ben Dworkin said: "While Jay Webber is a strong conservative and this is maybe perceived as a reaching out to others in the party, my first reaction is this is a supporter and that's who he [Christie] would want there."

As far as opening Christie to choosing a less-conservative running mate, Dworkin noted: "This doesn't buy off anybody. It simply presents a person who's going to be in charge of getting Republicans on the same page."

One of Webber's first jobs would be raising money.

The party has been outfunded and outspent by Democrats in recent years, has not won a statewide race since 1997 and does not control either house of the Legislature.

Webber would replace Tom Wilson, the chairman since 2004. Wilson was often criticized by conservatives, who would make tossing him out as party leader a plank in their primary platforms.

Wilson is most recently known for a prolonged court fight with Gov. Corzine over the release of e-mails between the governor and ex-girlfriend Carla Katz, who represented state workers in contract talks with the Corzine administration. Corzine won.

The normally talkative Wilson declined to comment yesterday, saying through a spokesman that it was Webber's day.

Webber graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 1994 and from Harvard Law School in 2000. He works for the Philadelphia-based Drinker Biddle & Reath's Florham Park office. He is married and has three children.