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## Christie taps conservative as pick for GOP chairman

Choice offers hope to critics who fear nominee is too moderate

BY CLAIRE HEININGER

TRENTON -- Republican gubernatorial candidate Chris Christie yesterday named a conservative Morris County assemblyman as state party chairman, seeking to galvanize a New Jersey GOP that has lost every statewide race since 1997 and is fresh from a competitive primary.

The selection of 37-year-old Jay Webber should also signal to young voters that they're welcome in the Republican fold, Christie said.

"I want to see a generational change in our party," said Christie, who mentioned his own tumultuous start in politics as a young Morris County freeholder in the 1990s.

"I want young people to believe that they don't have to wait 20 years before they get the opportunity to run for council somewhere," he said. "It's not the way I started my career, and I don't think that's the way it has to be."

Webber, a Morris Plains attorney elected to the Assembly in 2007, will face a formal vote by the Republican State Committee next week. The gubernatorial nominee of each party traditionally selects the state chairman. Gov. Jon Corzine is keeping Assemblyman Joseph Cryan (D-Union).

"I intend to go aggressively across the state and reach out to every Republican, young and old, to get involved in this effort," Webber said.

The move comes as Christie enters the next phase of his campaign after winning the Republican primary last week against former Bogota mayor Steve Lonegan. Christie must also select a running mate for lieutenant governor, and he campaigned in Rutherford yesterday alongside a leading candidate, Bergen County Clerk Kathleen Donovan.

Lonegan, who sent an e-mail to supporters this week claiming the primary moved Christie "to the right," did not respond to a phone call seeking comment. But his strategist, Rick Shaftan, said



Assemblyman Jay Webber (R-Morris) at a press conference today where GOP gubernatorial candidate Chris Christie, center, named Webber as his choice for state Republican party chair. Beside Christie is Senate Minority Leader Thomas Kean (R-Union).

Lonegan and his supporters are encouraged by the Webber selection and hope it indicates Christie will pick a conservative as his running mate. Lonegan considers someone like Donovan too moderate, Shaftan said.

"It might be a signal that he's going in a direction of essentially saying he's not afraid to call himself a conservative, even outside the primary," Shaftan said.

Christie and Webber brushed off talk of such labels during a Statehouse news conference yesterday, though Webber described himself as "one of the more conservative members in the Assembly -- maybe in the Legislature."

Webber's past GOP primary campaigns have been marked by debate over his staunch opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage.

"The only symbol that my lieutenant governor will represent is the ability on day one to govern," said Christie. "Our party's united, and they're united behind my candidacy."

Cryan disagreed.

"They're trying to unite through his chair," Cryan said. "They're still obviously split."

Webber would replace Tom Wilson, who has held the post since 2004 and ran the party's last successful statewide campaign when Christie Whitman was re-elected in 1997.

Christie and Webber praised Wilson's leadership during a "difficult" stretch for the party they hope to end this November. Christie widened his lead over Corzine to 10 points in the latest poll.

Webber said his immediate priorities will be fundraising -- Corzine is a multimillionaire who spends heavily on his own campaigns -- and voter outreach. Registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans in New Jersey by about 700,000 people, but unaffiliated voters outpace both.

One Christie fundraiser -- an event last night with former presidential candidate Mitt Romney -- was closed to the press, unlike many others in New Jersey. Christie said he made that decision so party members could interact with Webber in "as relaxed an atmosphere as possible."