



Jersey needs a lieutenant governor

By Albio Sires

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When Gov. James E. McGreevey resigns his office effective Nov. 15, the powers of the nation's most powerful gubernatorial office will devolve to Senate President Richard Codey, a seasoned and well-respected veteran legislator.

While this power transfer is constitutionally prescribed and marked by precedent, the ascendance of yet another acting governor is exposing a major shortcoming of New Jersey's system for replacing governors who leave office early: We are one of only eight states that do not fill such vacancies with a lieutenant governor. McGreevey's resignation would mark the second time in four years that the governorship will pass to a replacement for a protracted length of time - in this case, potential span of 14 months.

The last such power shift occurred in 2001, when Gov. Christie Whitman left office to join the Bush administration, enabling Senate President Donald DiFrancesco to simultaneously serve in the executive and legislative branches for 11 months.

DiFrancesco's eventual exit from the governor's office led to an absurd episode of gubernatorial musical chairs in early 2002, when New Jersey had an unprecedented four acting governors serving within one week. For a time, that experience generated intense interest in the creation of a lieutenant governor's post, but the fervor quickly subsided as a duly elected governor - McGreevey - finally took office.

McGreevey's impending resignation is now giving rise to renewed calls to create an office of lieutenant governor.

While my distinguished colleague Sen. Codey is widely considered up to the challenge of serving as acting governor, there is no getting around the inherent constitutional flaw of allowing a single person to head a legislative house and the state's executive branch at the same time.

It's an unsettling anomaly: The state constitution that creates the nation's most powerful governor's office allows acting governors to be even more powerful in the event a duly elected governor dies, resigns or is incapacitated. Such fortified office holding wreaks havoc with the balance of powers concept that calls for the executive, legislative and judicial branches to be co-equal arms of government.

It allows any senator serving as acting governor to sit in judgement as a legislative leader over his own recommended budget and personnel appointments. The quirk enables the Senate president to sign or veto bills he introduced and steered through the legislative process. Finally, it allows a person elected to serve the interests of a single legislative district to make decisions that are supposed to be in the interest of the state's entire population.

It's imperative that these constitutional inconsistencies be examined and addressed. We live in a different time than 1947 - the year our state constitution was crafted to set up the powerful governorship and designate the Senate president as the person first in line to fill a gubernatorial vacancy. The post-9/11 era in particular presents many more challenges than the state faced nearly 60 years ago. In many ways, we are a different state, and we need a different line of gubernatorial succession.

With a lieutenant governor, New Jersey could be assured of transferring gubernatorial powers to a person fully vested in representing the state as a whole. By serving alongside an elected governor, the lieutenant would benefit from on-the-job training to run the state's executive branch in the event of a governor's temporary absence or permanent vacancy.

A lieutenant governor also could open up new doors of opportunity for women and minorities to ascend to the highest reaches of state government. Nationally, 17 of the country's 42 lieutenant governors are women.

Public support for the concept is strong. An August Quinnipiac University poll showed 73 percent of New Jersey's registered voters favor creation of a lieutenant governor's post.

I intend to have the Assembly seize on this public sentiment by taking action on this issue in the closing months of this year. My proposal would allow candidates for governor and lieutenant governor to run as a team in party primaries and in the general election.

Such a change would require voter approval in the form of public referendum, which could be placed on the ballot as early as November 2005. If the question is approved, the first election to include candidates for lieutenant governor would be in 2009.

New Jersey is one of only three states that have just one state officeholder elected statewide. McGreevey's impending resignation presents the Legislature with a unique opportunity to rid the state of this dubious distinction. For the sake of future stability and government continuity, we should seize the moment and join the overwhelming majority of states that have lieutenant governors.

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