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Seeking youthful vision for party, Christie recommends Webber for GOP chairmanship

By **MAX PIZARRO**, PolitickerNJ.com Reporter

TRENTON - Presenting him as an emblem of youth, GOP gubernatorial nominee Chris Christie today unveiled 37-year old freshman Assemblyman Jay Webber (R-Morris Plains) as his recommendation to the Republican State Committee to be the party's next state chairman.



GOP gubernatorial nominee Chris Christie, center at microphone, with, from left: Assembly Minority Leader Alex DeCroce, Assemblyman Jay Webber, and Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean.

"It's time for the party to have a generational turn," said Christie, standing at a Statehouse podium with state Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean (R-Westfield) and Assembly Minority Leader Alex DeCroce (R-Parsippany), hours before a private Christie fundraiser headlined by former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, who Webber backed for president in 2008.

"Jay is one of the leading young leaders in our party," said Christie. "I like his instincts. Symbols are important in politics. ...I appreciate Jay's support since

February, and he has played a key role in terms of being a surrogate for me. I have a great deal of faith and trust in him. He exemplifies the principles we believe in in the party."

The party committee is scheduled to formally embrace Webber next week.

A Ronald Reagan conservative who put the exclamation point on Christie's formal declaration of his gubernatorial candidacy - and broke some hearts in the camp of movement conservative Steve Lonegan - when he likened Christie's leadership mold to Reagan, Webber said he was humbled and honored by Christie's backing to succeed Chairman Tom Wilson.

Heading off press questions about yet another white male at the top of his party's heap who in this case comes from a legislative district home to 242 registered African-American voters of 133,013 total registereds, Webber cracked that for "balance," Christie selected someone with ballpark tickets on the opposite side of the field from where Christie sits.

"Thanks for balancing this out," said Webber, a Harvard-educated attorney and family man who drubbed moderate Larry Casha of Montville in their 2007 primary encounter.

"He ran a tenacious campaign, a great campaign," Casha said today in a phone interview. "If he can be as tenacious on the Democrats, he'll do just fine. I think Jay's going to do a fine job."

Kean and DeCroce placed their own individual imprimaturs on the selection and so did Chair of the GOP Chairs state Sen. Kevin O'Toole (R-Cedar Grove), who applauded the Webber choice in a phone message.

Christie quibbled with the suggestion that the pro-lifer gives the vanquished Lonegan crowd a consolation prize on the eve of Christie's selecting what many insiders anticipate will be a pro-choice candidate for lieutenant governor like state Sen. Diane Allen (R-Burlington) or Bergen County Clerk Kathe Donovan and an inevitable deflation for Lonegan and company, who want a full-fledged conservative LG.

"I never felt constricted (to pick a conservative to counterbalance a moderate LG choice)," Christie said. "I get to pick who I want. I will pick a person who is ready to be governor on day one if something were to happen to me."

At least two Christie backers read Webber as the right kind of conservative Republican to satisfy Loneganites.

"Jay Webber will help bring in Lonegan supporters so we can be united to win in November," said Assemblyman Gary Chiusano (R-Franklin).

"He's a real big follower of the principles of Ronald Reagan, which I like," said state Sen. Steve Oroho (R-Franklin).

Democratic State Committee Chairman Joe Cryan, who tonight is expected to easily win another two-year term as his party's state chairman, said only of Webber, "I wish him good luck."

Moments before the Christie-Webber presser, Lonegan campaign strategist Rick Shaftan in a phone interview reiterated Lonegan's LG argument, which Webber's selection does nothing to change, Shaftan insisted.

"He (Christie) needs to pick a conservative," Shaftan said.

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