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ROSS TO LEAD LEGISLATURE FOR RECORD 7th TERM
McNALL, SMOLINSKI, WOJTASZEK GAIN CHAIRMANSHIPS

LOCKPORT—Niagara County Legislature Chairman William L. Ross, C-Wheatfield, will set a record when the County Legislature organizes on January 5.

The Wheatfield lawmaker was asked by colleagues at a Tuesday night organizational meeting at The Shamus in Lockport to stand for a seventh term as chairman of the Legislature. That means that when Ross raps the gavel for the first time that night, he will become the longest-serving chairman in county history.

"This certainly is an honor that I'm proud of," Ross said, adding, "It gives me the pride to do an outstanding job for both my colleagues and the taxpayers of Niagara County."

Within an hour of the Majority Caucus' unanimous support for a seventh term, which guarantees his January election, Ross was busily mapping out his strategy for 2010—a strategy that includes some new faces among the GOP-led Majority's leadership team. Ross outlined his plans from the Niagara County Public Information Office.

Ross named Legislator W. Keith McNall, R-Lockport, to chair the Legislature's Administration Committee. The committee, which has the final say on legislation before it moves to the floor for votes, plays a pivotal role in the Legislature. Ross also elevated Legislator Paul Wojtaszek, R-North Tonawanda, to become chairman of the Legislature's Community Safety and Security Committee—the panel with oversight of the Sheriff's Office and the county fire coordinator.

"[McNall] is a man with a depth of experience," Ross said, noting the Lockport lawmaker had served on the Lockport School District's Board of Education for 18 years, including six as president. "He's well-versed in all facets of financial structure dealing in the public sector. I expect Keith to be an outstanding Administration chairman."

Ross also praised Smolinski, who he asked to move to the Community Services Committee after heading Community Safety. Ross said Smolinski's abilities as chairman had impressed him.

"Community Service certainly entails more responsibility," Ross said, noting that Smolinski would have oversight of the Department of Social Services, the County Health Department, and Niagara County Community College.

"He has an awful lot to handle, but with his experience, we believe he'll be an outstanding Community Services chairman," Ross said.

Ross was joined at the podium by Wojtaszek, whose background, he said, made him uniquely-qualified to lead Community Safety and Security. Wojtaszek served as a county prosecutor for five years before

working as a prosecutor under then-Attorney General Dennis Vacco. For the past 12 years, he has served as a law clerk to a State Supreme Court judge.

"I don't think I could select a better-qualified person than Legislator Wojtaszek to chair Community Safety," Ross said. "With his legal background as an attorney, working in the public sector as a prosecutor, working with a judge as a legal clerk—I think Legislator Wojtaszek will be outstanding in this job."

Wojtaszek, who has expected the move for several weeks, has been quietly preparing an agenda based on past successes which he played a significant hand in, lending his legal expertise to the drafting of key local laws designed to protect county residents.

"I look forward to working with Sheriff [James R.] Voutour, District Attorney [Michael] Violante, and the other chiefs of the local police agencies in Niagara County," Wojtaszek said. "Among the things that I'm proud of that we've accomplished in my terms as a legislator is taking the lead, here in Niagara County, to ban texting while driving, and also passing a law to protect the children of Niagara County, the pedophile-free Child Safety Zones."

The latter law played a significant role in moving a convicted child molester out of two residential committees, and ultimately back into the New York state prison system, this past summer.

Wojtaszek said that he expected to focus heavily on homeland security in the next year, however.

"We'll be continuing in these endeavors to make our county safer, and one of the other issues that we need to address is homeland security," Wojtaszek said. "There's been a study done, and I am looking forward to addressing that issue and making it the focus of this committee's work."

Ross also announced that Legislature Vice Chairman Clyde L. Burmaster, R-Ransomville, will continue in that role, as well as his chairmanship of the Public Works Committee, while Majority Leader Rick Updegrave, R-Lockport, will continue to lead the Republican-controlled Majority as well as chair the Economic Development Committee—a body which has enjoyed several successes during Updegrave's tenure.

A somber Updegrave reacted confidently to his colleagues' unanimous request that he stay on as conference leader, but cautioned the year ahead would be challenging thanks to Albany's dysfunction.

"I appreciate the confidence that my fellow legislators have placed in me," Updegrave said. "But more importantly, I am pleased that our caucus continues to share a common vision of reduced tax burden, smaller government, and a continued dedication of resources to develop our economy."

Updegrave said he expected county lawmakers would have their work cut out for them due to problems caused by New York state's budget gap.

"As we enter a very difficult budget year, it is more important than ever that we maintain our focus on our mission," Updegrave said.

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