



WOMEN READY TO DEAL

Record number of female delegates heading up House committees

By KRIS WISE
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The House of Delegates has set a new record with an unprecedented number of women heading up committees or serving as co-chairwomen of the groups that help shape the Legislature's agenda.

New House Speaker Rick Thompson, D-Wayne, has appointed women to chair seven of the 17 standing committees: Constitutional Revision, Economic Development, Education, Judiciary, Pensions and Retirement, Roads and Transportation and Rule-making Review.

That's up from last year when just one committee had a woman at the helm.

"That's what I'm really encouraged about," Judiciary Chairwoman Carrie Webster, D-Kanawha, said. "In a perfect world gender should not be an issue, but it does matter because it hasn't always been this way."

Thompson began getting questions last month, soon after he announced his list of committee appointments, about his decision to name a woman to one of the



BOB WOJCIESZAK/DAILY MAIL
House Education Chairwoman Mary Poling, left, Roads and Transportation Chairwoman Lidella Hrutkay, and Rule-Making Review Chairwoman Bonnie Brown are three of the seven women who've been appointed to lead committees in the House of Delegates.

top leadership spots in the House.

Webster said Thompson's response to questions about her judiciary post crystallized the reasons why she had supported him in the Speaker's race.

"He wasn't even prepared for the question," Webster said. "Rick Thompson just really didn't pay attention to gender. He appointed who he thought would be best. I told him to embrace it because it is a big deal for a lot of people."

Among other lawmakers appointed to committee spots, Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, will head up Constitutional Revision after a two-year absence from the House. She was re-elected in November following a defeat in 2004.

Charlene Marshall, D-Monongalia, will spearhead the committee on economic development; Mary Poling, D-Barbour, will lead Education; Sharon Spencer, D-Kanawha, will head up Pensions and Retirement; Lidella Hrutkay, D-Logan, is chairwoman of Roads and Transportation; and Bonnie Brown, D-Kanawha, has been named to Rule-making Review.

In addition, Barbara Hatfield, D-Kanawha, will continue as co-chairwoman of the Health and Human Resources Committee and Linda Longstreth, D-Marion, will co-chair Veterans Affairs.

That's a total of nine women in the top spots, up from five last year. And only one woman chaired a committee last year: Rule-making Review's Virginia Mahan, D-Summers.

"I am pleased to be able to achieve more of a balance on the committees, but I must admit I wasn't thinking of gender," Thompson said. "I'm just fortunate to have a great pool of talent to choose from.

"I made it clear I embrace diversity and want to build consensus," Thompson said of his

win in the Speaker's race. "I certainly believe it's important to include a range of viewpoints that women bring to the table, and I value their input."

Barbara Hatfield, a retired nurse, will be vice-chairwoman of Health and Human Resources and is one of four females newly appointed to the Rule-making Review Committee, which looks at how proposed government rules and regulations will affect various industries.



HATFIELD
Co-chair, Health and Human Resources

The longtime Kanawha County lawmaker said she expects the increased number of women in leadership roles to change the dialogue in the Legislature, especially when it comes to some social policy issues.

"We will have a different perspective because we have different life experiences," Hatfield said. "I'm thrilled about it. We have women who are just really bright in education and financing and banking and insurance. We have multiple gifts up there we just have not tapped into."

Nationwide, a similar trend seems to be stirring up the political scene.

In addition to California Democrat Nancy Pelosi taking over as the first female Speaker of the House, an unprecedented number of women are serving in Congress.

With 71 in the House of Representatives and 16 in the Senate, the record is rivaled only by the largest ever number of female state legislators through-

out the country (1,736) and nine female governors, a tie with 2004.

Fifty-one percent of the country's population is female, but women still make up only 16 percent of Congress.

According to 2005 Census Bureau data, West Virginia is in line with the nation, with 51.1 percent of the population being female.

But despite gains in leadership posts, women actually are losing representatives in the Legislature.

Last year, three of the 31 state senators were female and 18 of 100 delegates were women.

Their numbers now have shrunk to two in the Senate after Sarah Minear, R-Tucker, retired last year, and 17 in the House after several shake-ups during November's election.

On the statewide level, the 2004 election of Betty Ireland as secretary of state made her the first woman ever elected to one of West Virginia's constitutional offices. Two women, Margaret Workman and Robin Davis, have served as state Supreme Court justices. Davis is still on the court.

The number of women who enter in the running for a legislative seat, and then win, hasn't increased dramatically in recent years.

"I have concerns about that because it seems like women might be losing confidence in their ability to serve in office, or just about the power of the offices themselves," Webster said.

"Most women who are part of this leadership circle have children or grandchildren and, when you do, it's difficult to give additional time to public service.

"If you don't believe you are making a difference, you get to the point where you think, 'Why do it?'"



Delegate Sharon Spencer, D-Kanawha and chairwoman of the House Pensions and Retirement Committee, has long criticized a plaque in a Capitol committee room that lists past Judiciary leaders. It's labeled "Chairmen."

Webster said this year's round of appointments should send an important message to many West Virginians.

"The selection of women to these positions will renew confidence to young people and to women in general that we can do it," Webster said.

That's something Sharon Spencer, D-Kanawha and new chairwoman of the House Pensions and Retirement Committee, said she's been trying to tell

skeptics — even some of her colleagues — for years.

"They had this little plaque that said, 'Chairmen of Judiciary,'" Spencer said, describing the sign in the committee room. "I used to tell people that the reason they had that plaque was because they were certain there would never be a woman. It thrills me that they'll have to change the sign."

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