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Veteran GOP state senators fend off challenges to posts

Caucus votes to keep Stoltzfus as minority leader, Harris as whip for next General Assembly session

By David Nitkin
Sun reporter

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The two ranking Republicans in the state Senate rebuffed a challenge to their leadership positions yesterday, as the 14-member GOP caucus voted to retain the current minority leader and whip for the 2006 General Assembly session.

Sen. J. Lowell Stoltzfus, the minority leader, fended off an upstart bid from first-term Sen. E.J. Pipkin for the caucus' top spot. Each represents portions of the Eastern Shore.

Sen. Andrew P. Harris of Baltimore County will remain as whip, surviving an effort by Sen. David R. Brinkley of Frederick County to unseat him.

The caucus met in private for about 90 minutes yesterday and emerged claiming it was unified behind Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. entering an election year. Senators would not disclose the vote totals for either race.

"We feel like it's been a very positive experience for us," Stoltzfus said, speaking of the debate surrounding the leadership challenge. "I can assure you this caucus has never been more united."

The challenge began when Brinkley launched an effort to unseat Harris, an anesthesiologist who is a prolific fundraiser, poised debater and one of the Assembly's most conservative members.

To Annapolis insiders, the challenge represented a split among factions within the GOP. With an election approaching, many observers believe Ehrlich could stake out some moderate positions during the 2006 Assembly session, including some form of state support for stem-cell research - a position that some Republican lawmakers may prefer to oppose. During his first three years in office, the governor has kept the GOP caucus united in both the House and Senate even as some conservative members asked for more pro-gun or anti-abortion votes.

Stoltzfus refused to disclose which issues the caucus debated yesterday as it decided on leaders. "We've discussed many things," he said. "We feel like we are going to continue to work together." He also would not say whether Ehrlich intervened in the challenge.

"The governor completely supports the Senate caucus' leadership," Henry Fawell, a spokesman for Ehrlich, said yesterday. "The governor will have a very ambitious agenda in the upcoming session and looks forward to having their support."

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After Brinkley said he was challenging Harris, Pipkin - who ran for the U.S. Senate last year, spending nearly \$2 million of his own money - decided to challenge Stoltzfus. Pipkin said he had more time to campaign and do the fundraising needed for the GOP to make gains in targeted Senate districts next year.

But yesterday, the Pipkin and Stoltzfus stood side by side and declared they would work with each other.

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Sun reporter Andrew A. Green contributed to this article.

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