

Spitzer's fall could hinder New York marriage bill

But new governor has strong pro-gay record

LOU CHIBBARO JR

Friday, March 14, 2008

Gay New Yorkers hoped for the best this week as the resignation of Gov. Eliot Spitzer over a sex scandal threatened to undermine an expected Democratic Party would improve chances for passage take-over of the New York State Senate, which of a same-sex marriage bill.

Spitzer, a Democrat, resigned from office on Wednesday after news surfaced earlier in the week that he had been a frequent client of a high-end prostitution ring.

The revelations threw the New York Legislature into disarray as Spitzer dropped out of sight and Republican critics demanded his resignation and threatened to impeach him. Democratic Party leaders agonized over whether the scandal would hurt their plans for winning the few seats needed to gain full control of the Legislature. Democrats control the New York Assembly.

The Assembly passed a same-sex marriage rights bill last year but the bill became stalled in the Republican-controlled Senate after Republican leaders bottled it up in committee.

Lt. Gov. David Paterson, also a Democrat, is set to replace Spitzer on Monday, the day Spitzer's resignation takes effect. Paterson, 53, becomes the state's first black governor and the first legally blind governor in the nation.

Paterson is the former minority leader of the State Senate. He has a strong pro-gay record dating back to the beginning of his political career as a civil rights activist from Harlem.

"If there is any consolation to this very sad story it's that David Paterson would become governor," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force and a longtime New York gay activist.

Under succession rules set by the New York Constitution, Republican Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, a strong opponent of gay rights, including the gay marriage bill, becomes acting lieutenant governor. Bruno would be next in line to become governor or acting governor if Paterson leaves office for any reason, such as death or resignation, or becomes incapacitated.

Foreman noted that Paterson played an important role helping to pass a New York gay rights bill and he has been a longtime supporter of same-sex marriage rights. Earlier this year, the Task Force named Paterson as a recipient of its Leadership Award. He is scheduled to appear at the group's Leadership Award dinner in Manhattan on April 7 to accept the award.

In an interview with the New York Blade in January 2006, Paterson reiterated his support for New York's proposed same-sex marriage bill.

"I'm not going to be in that fight, I'm going to be in front of that fight," he said, noting that he helped pass the state's Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act when he first became Senate Minority Leader.

Alan Van Capelle, executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, a statewide gay rights

group, called Paterson a loyal friend of the GLBT community.

"I want all of you to know that our community will continue to have an ally and a friend in the Governor of New York — one who has been a strong supporter of all of our key issues and one that is committed to winning a pro-LGBT majority in the State Senate," Capelle said in a statement.

Spitzer has also been a strong gay rights supporter. In his 2006 election campaign for governor, he pledged to sign a same-sex marriage bill and promised to advocate vigorously for passage of such a bill. During his eight-year tenure as New York State Attorney General, Spitzer spoke out in favor of gay and transgender rights and marched in New York City's Gay Pride parade.

"It is a very sad day when you have a governor who has to step down," Christine Quinn, president of the New York City Council and a lesbian, said in a statement to the Blade. "I was happy to have worked closely with Gov. Eliot Spitzer and the New York State Assembly to pass the marriage equity bill, marking a great victory for New Yorkers in the ongoing battle for justice.

The revelations identifying Spitzer as a customer of a prostitution operation stemmed from an FBI investigation into a money-laundering scheme linked to the operation, which billed itself as the Emperors Club VIP. An FBI wiretap showed that a customer identified by law enforcement sources as Spitzer paid \$4,300 to have sex with a female prostitute in Washington's Mayflower Hotel on Feb. 13, one of Spitzer's many liaisons with prostitutes, law enforcement sources told the New York Times.

"The entire situation is extremely unfortunate," Foreman said. "Were it not for the fact that he prosecuted prostitution rings when he was attorney general, there would be no reason for him to resign," said Foreman, who noted that the hypocrisy factor made it difficult for Spitzer to stay in office.

Evan Wolfson, executive director of Freedom To Marry, a same-sex marriage advocacy group, said Paterson's tenure as a state senator since 1985 and his reputation as a conciliator could outweigh any problems for passing a same-sex marriage bill caused by the Spitzer scandal.