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Lockhart elected as speaker of the House

Becky Lockhart became the first female speaker of the Utah House of Representatives on Thursday night.

Lockhart, R-Provo, beat out incumbent Speaker Dave Clark, R-Santa Clara, for the top leadership position in the state House. She is the only Utah County legislator in an elected leadership position in the Legislature and the first woman to hold the top leadership position in either house since Utah became a state 114 years ago.

Lockhart joins a small group of women around the country serving in state legislative leadership roles. In 2010, five women served as speakers of state houses, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

Lockhart didn't set out to make history, though. The 12-year representative drove her campaign by talking to colleagues, finding out their concerns, creating connections and considering solutions.

"I just really focused on that," Lockhart said Thursday night, after she'd spent an hour calling friends and family to tell them the news. "The whole issue of the first woman speaker, while it was out there, it just wasn't a factor for me."

The change didn't necessarily mean representatives were unhappy with Clark's leadership, said Rep. John Dougall, R-Highland, although that could be a factor. Many people have said they would like to see one-term leaders to keep different personalities moving through those positions.

"I know Becky has a history of trying to be open, transparent and so forth," he said. "I would hope that as speaker she would continue that type of agenda."

Lockhart doesn't have an agenda for the next two years; her goals include meeting with the rest of the leadership team and the majority caucus and discussing the issues they'll be confronting in January, including tough subjects like immigration, the budget and economic growth. She also will be working with Gov. Gary Herbert and the Senate leadership in tackling those issues.

For now, though, she's enjoying the moment.

"It's kind of an unreal feeling right now," Lockhart said. "I think it'll take a few hours for it to set in."

The representatives actually had to vote four times before electing Ronda Menlove, R-Garland, as the majority assistant whip. This vote marked the only time state legislators can cast a secret ballot. Every other vote on the floor is recorded, but the vote for legislative leadership remains private. The actual tallies were not announced either; the first candidate to get 30 votes is the winner.

This is good for Utah County in the sense that Lockhart is aware of issues in her county, Dougall said, but it probably won't give the most conservative county in the state any advantages beyond that. Her election gives Lockhart a significant amount of authority, however, said one political analyst.

"The legislative branch in Utah is by design very powerful, and an empowered speaker can really move the policy and money decisions in the state," said Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics.

Senate Republicans voted to keep the same leaders in place as ran in 2010; Sen. Curt Bramble, R-Provo, who filed to run for Senate majority leader at about noon on Wednesday, was not elected.