

LEAVITT: GUN-CONTROL ROLE UNRELATED TO STEPHENS

Dan Harrie

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Gov. Mike Leavitt insisted Friday his decision against leading the charge for gun-control in the 2000 Legislature was unrelated to his recent public reconciliation with House Speaker Marty Stephens and the conservative wing of his own Republican Party.

"I've never once asked Marty Stephens to change his position and he never once asked me to change mine," Leavitt said. "My position is as it's always been."

Leavitt supports a ban on legally concealed weapons in schools and churches but says he won't expend political capital fighting for that position or other gun restrictions in the legislative session beginning Jan. 17.

The governor spent much of Friday on damage-control efforts after The Salt Lake Tribune reported that some gun-control advocates believe conservative Republicans, including legislators, have spooked Leavitt away from taking the lead on the emotional gun issue. The article also quoted House Democratic Leader Dave Jones and Utahns Against Gun Violence spokesman Steve Gunn speculating that Leavitt's sideline stand on gun legislation might have been connected to Stephens' decision not to challenge the governor in next year's election.

Not true, the governor said, claiming he has made it clear for months that his leadership role on the issue ended in July when House Republicans rejected his call for an emergency legislative session on gun control.

"I reached a point it was time for me to move onto something else," Leavitt said. "We had reached the point of diminishing returns on this issue. We were wasting public time."

Still, questions persist about just when and why the governor decided to relinquish the gun-control banner.

While insisting he publicly declared "hundreds of times" during the summer and fall that he would not push gun control in the annual legislative session, the Tribune could discover no press releases or news articles to corroborate that assertion.

Moreover, a leading proponent of gun restrictions said he was caught flat-footed by Leavitt's statement in a televised news conference Thursday that any gun bills advanced in the upcoming legislative session would have to come at the initiative of law-makers.

"We never heard that" previously, said Ted Wilson, a leader of the coalition campaigning for a ballot initiative to prohibit legally concealed weapons in schools and churches. "To take a hike on this during the legislative session is to default on this, and that's kind of sad."

Wilson, a Democrat and director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, said the initiative coalition leaders spoke with Leavitt as recently as mid-October. "He certainly led us to believe he was going to be a leader on this when the session came up."

To now step aside and say he only will respond to bills passed by the Legislature "is not leadership, it's followership," Wilson said. "I think the conservative faction has frightened the governor and made him feel squeamish about his own leadership."

Republican Party Chairman Rob Bishop is a lobbyist for the National Rifle Association-affiliated Utah Shooting Sports Council.

He said he had not previously heard that Leavitt would stand down on the gun issue during the next legislative session.

Leavitt's stand on gun control was one of several galvanizing issues for an attempted conservative coup, Bishop said, because of the way Leavitt publicly campaigned last summer for an emergency legislative session on guns.

"[Lawmakers] were put in a difficult position by the governor," Bishop said.

The governor's vow to talk and listen more to conservative legislators was necessary to heal the party's wounds, Bishop said. "Yeah, he's finally heard the message. It's not a new message, but I think he's clearly heard it this time."

In explaining his step back from the gun-control front lines, Leavitt said he feared as early as July that feuding over guns in the 2000 legislative session could jeopardize action on his top priority issue -- making an unprecedented investment in public schools and universities.

Leavitt said his decision was propelled by several factors. He said the "window of opportunity" to enact gun legislation was opened by public opinion after the Columbine massacre and two random shooting sprees in Salt Lake City, but slammed shut when lawmakers rejected his plan for a special session.

Additionally, the governor said his continued vocal leadership on the issue could actually backfire and hurt prospects for legislation because of resentment by law-makers.

"There are times," he said, "when a leader is productive just getting out of the way."