

Defiant Lee faces new role

Senator has respect of peers

By Diane Hirth

DEMOCRAT CAPITOL BUREAU

Wed, Dec. 10, 2003 On the golf team in college and still a serious golfer, Sen. Tom Lee knows how to take a swing or two.

Last May, this Republican developer from Brandon criticized the state budget as "put together with Band-Aids and paper clips" and **vowed never again to support a budget that raids trust funds** (*emphasis added*) to finance ongoing programs.

Lee scolded Gov. Jeb Bush last summer for instigating "blood-letting" in the party when Bush and his allies threatened election retribution for those who bucked the governor's proposed \$250,000 cap on medical-malpractice "pain and suffering" damages.

Most recently, Lee defied Bush's characterization of the state giving \$310 million to bring Scripps Research Institute to Florida as sure-fire economic development, saying it was more like supporting university-style research.

But on Tuesday, Lee accepted the Republican caucus's unanimous designation as Senate president and spoke of the Senate's tradition of inclusive, innovative leadership.

Lee assumes the post after the November 2004 elections. He said he is committed to redoing the Legislature's most basic task - writing the state's budget - and wants to a constitutional amendment requiring a five-year spending plan.

"We spend all our time applying the money that was estimated at the last revenue estimating conference, as opposed to looking down the road," Lee said. He said **he is troubled by failure to invest in Florida's infrastructure, especially education and transportation, which he termed "the goose that lays the eggs for economic development."** (*emphasis & underlining added*)

Lee faces the challenge of financing the needs of a growing 16-million-population state. The Senate's desire to raise more revenue has been beaten back by Bush and the Johnnie Byrd-led House.

Nearby Lee on Tuesday was family - parents Jim and Ann, whom he credited with his success, 6-year-old daughter, Regan, and 2-year-old son, Brandon, who fell asleep.

Just as noticeably there in full force was the Florida Republican family - as if to set aside the intraparty wrangling that led to five special sessions this year and major

blow-ups between Bush and the Senate, and House Speaker Byrd and Senate President Jim King.

Virtually every prominent Republican leader in the state - including Bush, Lt. Gov. Toni Jennings, Attorney General Charlie Crist and Chief Financial Officer Tom Gallagher - were there to applaud Lee's rise to power. Rep. Allan Bense, R-Panama City, the House speaker-designate who will share legislative leadership with Lee, sat beside the next Senate president as the nomination speeches unrolled.

"I am eternally grateful," Lee said of those showing their support.

After the ceremony, Bush said of his future relationship with Lee, "I think we're going to have a good one."

Lee had asked Bense to sit by him and said, "I think you're going to be a great speaker ... and a great friend." Lee also thanked Democratic senators who were there, and he said the upper chamber must be bipartisan.

Said Sen. Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee, "Lee reminds me of the leadership we used to have in the Senate, not just rubber-stamping what the governor wants He's going to stand up for Florida. He's capable and a pretty likeable person, and as Democrats, we will have access to Lee."

Lee conceded little is likely to be accomplished on his budget priorities in 2004, with Bush trying to re-elect his brother as U.S. president and the GOP trying to claim a U.S. Senate seat for Florida.

But "once this presidential election is behind us in 2005," Lee said, "Republicans in the Legislature will be forced to take a real hard look at what we're doing."

When the hoopla was over, Lee and daughter Regan, just the two of them, left the Senate, holding hands.

Political career: Designated to be next Florida Senate president, November 2004-06; Senate Rules and Calendar Chairman; former chairman of Senate select committee on constitutional amendment implementation; elected to Senate in 1996.

District: Represents Hillsborough, Pasco and Polk counties in Senate District 10.

Age: 41 (lived in Florida since age 7)

Education: B.S., business, University of Tampa

Occupation: Vice president, Sabal Homes of Florida Inc.

Children: Regan, 6, and Brandon, 2