



### Week of Jan. 2, 2023

#### Stephens, Huffman selected to lead chambers as 135th General Assembly begins

Rep. **Jason Stephens** on Tuesday was selected Speaker of the Ohio House of Representatives, beating out fellow Republican nominee Rep. **Derek Merrin** with 54 votes to 43.

Stephens' win and the manner in which he won were both surprising and historic. In November, House Republicans informally selected Merrin as their next speaker after he joined forces with fellow contender Rep. **Phil Plummer**. This secured Plummer's votes for Merrin and catapulted him ahead of Stephens, thereby eclipsing the 50-vote minimum. But Tuesday morning, intense rumors swirled on Capitol Square that Stephens had been courting key members of his own party - and also House Democrats - to combine their support behind him.

Stephens' gambit paid off as 22 members of his 67-member caucus cast their vote for Stephens, joined by all 32 House Democrats who traditionally nominate a candidate from their own party but did not do so this time. Stephens, an insurance agent, former county auditor, and former county commissioner, becomes perhaps the only speaker in Ohio history to win the speaker's gavel while earning less than one-third of their own caucus' support.

Why did House Democrats help Stephens? Why did 22 House Republicans cut ties with Merrin? Definitive answers to these questions are not yet known, and Democratic Minority Leader Rep. **Allison Russo** told reporters there was "no grand deal." But conversations around the Statehouse indicated Merrin's leadership style and extreme far-right positions on issues like abortion, collective bargaining, and universal vouchers gave moderate Republicans pause and also gave House Democrats no other option but to choose to work with the more moderate option in Stephens. News reports also indicate Democrats believed Stephens would work with them on major issues like redistricting and school funding. In the end, a Stephens speakership itself may have been enough of a deal for House Democrats.

Stephens' leadership team has yet to be announced, except for Rep. **Scott Oelslager** (R-North Canton), who was elected to be Speaker Pro Tempore, the chamber's second highest position. Oelslager's new post means he can no longer chair the powerful House Finance Committee. Potential replacements include term-limited Rep. **Jay Edwards**, who appears to be the top contender, and Rep. **DJ Swearingen**.

Meanwhile in the Ohio Senate, there were no surprises as Sen. **Matt Huffman** was unanimously approved as President of the Ohio Senate, his last term in the post. Sen. **Nickie Antonio** was voted minority leader.

#### Senate announces committee assignments

The Senate released its committee assignments, including the following committees:

Finance (10 Republicans, three Democrats):

- Sen. **Matt Dolan**, chair
- Sen. **Jerry Cirino**, vice chair

- Sens. **Bill Blessing, Andrew Brenner, Theresa Gavarone, George Lang, Nathan Manning, Bill Reineke, Mark Romanchuk, Kirk Schuring, Vernon Sykes, Hearcel Craig, Paula Hicks-Hudson**

Education (five Republicans, two Democrats):

- Sen. **Andrew Brenner**, chair
- Sen. **Sandra O'Brien**, vice chair
- Sens. **Bill Blessing, Steve Huffman, Michele Reynolds, Vernon Sykes, and Catherine Ingram**

### **Notable Quotes on Education Issues**

"I frankly was surprised that had the momentum that it did by the end of the year. I think those with some trepidation because it was a short timeframe in the House voted 'no.' I certainly get that, but we'll have time right away [this session]." - Sen. **Matt Huffman**, on the education agency overhaul bill, Senate Bill 178.

"Certainly, we're going to look at what we did in the budget last time and look for other ways to make sure that the money is being spent in a productive way. What happened in the 134th General Assembly won't be binding on the 135th, or the 140th, or the 200th." - Sen. **Matt Huffman**, on the Fair School Funding Plan and whether the Senate will continue funding the formula in 2023.

### **Bills Signed by Gov. DeWine**

Gov. **Mike DeWine** this week signed several bills, including:

- [SB 288](#), which was amended on the House floor to include a requirement for public schools to annually provide age-appropriate sex abuse prevention education to K-6 students and sexual violence prevention education for grades 7-12. Lawmakers also included a provision prohibiting the K-6 instruction from being provided by organizations that provide abortion services.
- [SB 33](#), which included the provisions of [HB 123](#) that modifies community reinvestment areas (CRA) by increasing to 75% from 50% the threshold of CRA exemption that requires obtaining school district permission and increases the employee payroll threshold applicable to CRA commercial and industrial projects to \$3 million from \$1 million. It also expands the income tax deduction allowed for contributions to Ohio's 529 education savings program to include contributions to 529 programs established by other states.