

Lyons leaves House with lasting legacy

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HARTFORD - House Speaker **Moira Lyons** can list among her accomplishments new transportation initiatives, health care and educational programs.

Now the Stamford Democrat has cemented her legacy as speaker of the **Connecticut House of Representatives**, but not for any particular policy, and not just for being the first woman to hold the position. Lyons, retiring from the House this year, is the only speaker in state history to appoint a committee to probe the possible impeachment of an elected governor. She may also be the first speaker to preside over a House impeachment vote. "It will be a very historic moment," Lyons said after the end of the legislative session this week. "No speaker has ever presided over that before. I hope the House will have proper decorum when we preside over it." First elected to the House in 1980 and as speaker in 1999, Lyons said she never expected to end up in government. "When I first saw the Capitol (as a child) I had never been in the **House chamber** before and I remember thinking, 'I would never want to do that,'" Lyons said.--photo1R--

Though she has never before experienced an impeachment process, she is not unfamiliar with tough situations. She has served through three governors, contentious budget battles, and the controversial adoption of a state income tax in the early 1990s - a tax she opposed along with a group of other moderate **Democrats**. One of those was House Majority Leader **James Amann**, D-Milford. Now he is the presumed next speaker and said he hopes to carry Lyons' work ethic into the position. "She is the first woman speaker and she is not only intelligent, but she's as tough as nails," Amann said. "In a Capitol dominated by men, she has held her own." Amann said she voted against him for majority leader and he voted against her for speaker in 2003, though he supported her in previous years. But he said they worked well together over the last two years. He admires Lyons for assembling the impeachment panel and pushing through a veto-proof budget as part of her finale. "She can go out and hold her head high," Amann said.

Though not always known as the most articulate member of the **General Assembly**, Lyons has survived high-pressure confrontations. During the 2003 budget battle, the state was looking at a \$1.2 billion shortfall, and Democratic leaders had to work with a Republican minority to approve a budget after Gov. **John G. Rowland** had vetoed three of them. Lyons had to convince the left wing of her party to go along with compromises. The result was a \$27.5 billion budget with cuts in social spending and tax increases that virtually no one liked. But this year, the finances were

easier. Lyons presided over adjustments to the budget that added \$40 million more to schools with no tax increases. "The most important aspect of any session is the budget," Lyons said of the plan passed this year. "We made up for the deficiencies in the budget and most importantly, it's veto proof." The governor's veto threat used to be enough to send Democratic leaders back to the drawing board. Not this year, with the embattled Rowland's base of support at an all-time low. "She is an incredibly detailed person with an encyclopedic memory," said Rep. **Robert Godfrey**, D-Danbury, who has served in the House since 1989. "She knows more about bills than some committee chairmen." Rep. **Julia Wasserman**, R-Newtown, had mixed views on Lyons' leadership. "She's a good person, intelligent and warm and quite knowledgeable," said Wasserman, a House member since 1991. "As far as her leadership, it varies. She can move bills very fast. But I don't know how good her organization is. Many times she'll stop between bills to consult with staff." In 2000, a year after she became speaker, **Good Housekeeping magazine** recognized Lyons as one of its "Top 10 Women in Government." The recognition came largely because Lyons drafted a managed health care reform plan that included an appeals process for consumers who are denied access to health care by their insurance companies. The proposal became a national model passed by other states and considered in Congress. Lyons has had a long-term interest in mass transit and other transportation issues. She served as co-chairwoman of the **Transportation Committee** from 1985 to 1992. Later, while House majority leader, she pushed legislation to start the **Transportation Strategy Board** to evaluate state needs and recommend projects. During the last three years, Lyons has backed legislation for early childhood reading, a school readiness initiative for preschool children and a school accountability act that prevented social promotion. Danbury Mayor **Mark Boughton**, a former House member on the Republican side, said Lyons did a great job. "She broke the mold of tradition," Boughton said. "Most speakers only serve two terms. She has served three, and she's the first woman to have the job. As a CEO of a city, she understands our concerns." The regular 2004 session of the General Assembly ended a few minutes after midnight Wednesday, the scheduled deadline. Lawmakers will take up a few budget implementation bills in a special session for next week and could come into session to consider an impeachment vote. But this was Lyons' last regular session. She mused afterward that allowing the session to run a few minutes beyond midnight was by design. "It was a bittersweet night," Lyons said. "I wanted to delay the end because I didn't want to leave."

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