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EDITORIALS

New state era begins . . .

Soon-to-be Gov. Paterson must prove his leadership

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New York will have a new governor next week, adding uncertainty to turmoil. With a state budget due on April 1, David A. Paterson has no time to waste and a steep learning curve ahead of him.

While his supporters say Paterson is tough, the new governor now must prove that he is — if the state is to gain the reforms in governance it still needs. His experience to date has been almost exclusively legislative, not executive. Key legislative skills include compromise and amiability, traits generally acknowledged as Paterson strengths. But while governors can make friends, they also must be willing, when needed for the right cause, to make enemies. For a new executive, that is an inevitable test of leadership.

As lieutenant governor, Paterson got a chance to champion some causes and some agenda items. His political base and background, though, are rooted firmly in Harlem and New York City, and he is not deeply versed in the problems and potential of upstate New York — yet. He must ensure that he gains that knowledge, quickly.

But knowledge itself is not enough. Commitment is even more important. Upstate in general, and the Buffalo area in particular, must push hard for the survival of key elements of the Spitzer agenda — an agenda that included a \$1 billion economic redevelopment package to revitalize upstate, an emphasis on expanding the University at Buffalo as a flagship research campus for the state university system and a key partner in Buffalo's recovery, and Niagara Falls redevelopment that included projects with short-term payoffs and a Niagara Experience Center with long-term potential.

Spitzer also was a force for reform and — ironically — ethics in Albany. Paterson must take up that

challenge, as well — although Spitzer now has made that much less believable and much more difficult.

Paterson's installation Monday as governor will be historic. He will be New York's first black governor, and only the eighth in American history. And he will be the first visually-impaired governor here. Both are significant factors and, to some degree, worthy of celebration. But neither matters much, compared to the measure of his capabilities that now is demanded of him.

Harlem, which he represented as a minority party leader in the Republican state Senate, is about as far as you can get from Buffalo. But there are thematic links, in this city's poverty and decline, and we can hope for empathy with the needs of those who suffer in urban poverty, no matter the location.

As he enters the challenging new job that has been thrust upon him by circumstances and the state constitution, Paterson would do well to keep several things in mind:

- It's going to take time for him to grow into the job. Some of his supporters say that a true Paterson governorship is still six months away. He would be wise to pace himself, and make sure he does indeed grow.
- Dramatic and sudden staff turnover would be unwise. Although many of Spitzer's staff came with him from the attorney general's office and brought with them the aggressive attitude of lawyers rather than experience in the kinds of political deal-making most familiar to Paterson and other politicians, they have developed the current state policy framework and should be relied upon for now.
- The agenda for upstate developed by Spitzer is important, and Paterson should hold to it if he is to forge ahead as a leader of the entire state. Meeting with private and public sector leaders from this area should be a priority.
- By all accounts, the new governor is a man who likes to be liked. By all accounts and by history, a governor cannot value that above the demands of leadership. Paterson should follow a simple guideline: Do what's good for the people of New York State.
- Spitzer won 70 percent of the votes in the 2006 election based on a promise to change the way business is done in Albany. All his flaws in execution, and now in character, don't change that clear expression of demand by the people. Paterson is the product of an entrenched political system, but he signed on to the Spitzer reform agenda and he must not abandon it now.

The new governor does bring a great deal of political experience to this job, serving in the state Senate since 1985. He has impressed Western New Yorkers during his few visits here, and he now has a chance to forge closer ties. That can start from a strong point — his friendship with Buffalo Mayor Byron W. Brown, a former Senate colleague who played a key role in winning Paterson the minority leadership post he held there before become Spitzer's No. 2.

Most of all, Paterson must now become as well known here as he has been in his Harlem political base, and renew the course that would revive upstate and bring all of New York a better government of the people, not just of politicians. It is a daunting challenge. We wish him well — for all of our sakes, as well as for his.

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