

Taylor Barras faces leadership questions

BY TYLER BRIDGES

At 3:30 p.m. Thursday, his colleagues gave Speaker Taylor Barras the coveted "gentleman of the House" award.

Two and a half hours later, the House was in an uproar. The Legislature's regular session ended in chaos, with Democrats and moderate Republicans shouting that Barras had blocked them from approving the Senate's version of the budget - which would have sent the Legislature home and the beleaguered speaker facing rumblings that his job was imperiled. At 6:30 p.m., the House and Senate began a special session to try again to pass the budget, but the House, at Barras' behest, immediately adjourned until Monday.

Barras, R-New Iberia, endured stinging criticism over the weekend, and on Monday, he faced questions about whether his job is secure.

"It's getting to be a regular occurrence," he said lightly, adding that after talking with colleagues over the weekend, "I feel comfortable in where I am."

State Rep. Kenny Havard, R-St. Francisville, is the lawmaker mentioned most often as a potential replacement.

In an interview Monday, Havard said some colleagues have begun playfully calling him "Mr. Speaker," but added, "I am not running for speaker. I have not picked up the phone and called anybody."

Still, he said, "If it were the will of the body, I would certainly take it, and anybody else would."

Havard, who is serving his second term, faced sharp criticism last year after he offered a sarcastic amendment to a bill that said all strippers had to be at least 21 years old. Havard's change would have prohibited strippers from being overweight or older than 28.

Havard, who was named by Barras to chair the House Transportation Committee, could be chosen as speaker only through a bipartisan vote that included moderate Republicans and virtually all Democrats. While saying he is not seeking the job, he made clear he favors a more centrist approach than the one the House has pursued.

"I want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem," Havard

said. "I'm scared to death of the extremes of both sides."

State Rep. Rob Shadoin, R-Ruston, is also mentioned as a possible replacement for Barras. Like Havard, Shadoin said he is making no moves to seek the job, but added: "We need a change of direction. What we're doing is not helping the people of Louisiana."

State Rep. Chris Broadwater, R-Hammond, also mentioned as a possibility, said, "I'm spending my time trying to figure a path toward solving the problems that face us immediately - passage of a budget."

The Senate's version of the budget would have spent all of the money anticipated in the new fiscal year, which begins July 1, while directing state agencies to set aside \$50 million as a contingency. The House's negotiators favored cutting \$100 million from the budget to have a cushion in case of yet another revenue shortfall.

Barras didn't let the House vote on the Senate version on Thursday. Had he done so, Havard, Shadoin and Broadwater all thought the House would have approved it.

Barras isn't the only one singled by last week's messy finish. State Rep. Walt Leger III, D-New Orleans, the speaker pro tem, is also facing questions about his job status. Though the pro-tem job is largely ceremonial, it is the second-ranking position in the House and comes with an office next to that of the speaker.

Before Monday's session began, state Rep. Gene Reynolds, of Minden, who chairs the Democratic caucus, fretted that Republicans would try to replace Leger as speaker pro tem that day with one of their own. They didn't.

"I'm not for any leadership changes now," state Rep. Jim Morris, R-Oil City, said when asked about Leger. Asked about Barras, Morris said, "I support the speaker 100 percent. He's doing the will of this body."

Republicans hold 61 of the 105 House seats. But in January 2016, the House elected Leger as the speaker pro tem - immediately after choosing Barras as the speaker - in a show of bipartisanship led by Morris, who could have had the job. Leger had been Gov. John Bel Edwards' favored candidate for the speaker's post.

Leger angered some Republicans last week by trying three times to force the House to vote on the Senate's version of the budget during

the final chaotic minutes of the regular session on Thursday.

In an interview Monday with four reporters, Barras called Leger "a great colleague" and said he didn't expect Leger to be removed. But he declined to answer whether he would oppose such a move.

First elected to the House in 2007 as a Democrat, Barras, 60, switched parties in 2011. The House chose him as speaker in January 2016, over Leger. It was the first time in memory that a governor's ally didn't get the nod. Republicans turned to Barras as someone liked by everyone after state Rep. Cameron Henry, of Metairie, couldn't secure enough votes because he was too conservative.

The speaker decides who chairs each committee, who sits on each committee and which bills will be heard each day. He also serves as the House's lead spokesman with the public and the chief negotiator with the governor and the state Senate.

The latest complaints about Barras are not new. Two months ago, as the regular session began, The Advocate published a lengthy story that raised questions about Barras' control over the House and reported that many insiders felt his authority was limited by the competing influence exerted by of state Rep. Lance Harris, of Alexandria, who chairs the Republican caucus, and Henry, who chairs the Appropriations Committee.

Ten days ago, the Lafayette Daily Advertiser editorialized that Barras had governed so weakly that he ought to resign as speaker, and the leader of the powerful Associated Builders and Contractors trade group wrote a memo, which became public, that decried Barras' lack of leadership.

Over the weekend, The Advocate, The Times-Picayune and the Lake Charles American Press all published columns or editorials that criticized the House leadership.

None of it seemed to ruffle Barras, who seemed at ease as he patiently answered reporters' questions Monday, occasionally joking and never raising his voice.

He defended his actions last week, saying he and his colleagues in the House didn't have enough information about the Senate's version of the budget to allow a vote in the final minutes.

But his actions angered numerous lawmakers. Nine different legislators - a mix of Democrats and Republicans - said Monday in interviews with

The Advocate that they heard members privately raise concerns about Barras continuing as speaker.

State Rep. Stuart Bishop, R-Lafayette, said he would have no part of the "rumblings" against Barras. "He keeps both sides together," Bishop said. "He's fair."