

Meet Joe Lopinto: Incoming 'level-headed' sheriff of Jefferson Parish

By Julia O'Donoghue

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In 2008, the Louisiana House of Representatives underwent a transformation as state term limits for legislators kicked in for the first time. Lawmakers who had been serving for decades either moved on to the state Senate or left elected office altogether. For the first time in years, a number of the representatives in the House had no prior legislative experience at all.

Under these circumstances, a few younger freshmen began to stand out for their ability to grasp the legislative process quickly, according to several members of the Legislature. Among those stars were John Bel Edwards, a Democrat from Amite, and Joe Lopinto, a Republican from Metairie.

Nine years later, Edwards is, of course, Louisiana's governor, and this Wednesday (July 25), Lopinto became Jefferson Parish Sheriff Newell Normand's handpicked successor.

"Joe Lopinto would be great at whatever his job is, wherever his job is," said Rep. Chris Broadwater, R-Hammond, in an interview Wednesday. "When I joined the Legislature, I looked at him and said 'I need to be conducting myself like that.'"

Jefferson Parish Sheriff Newell Normand to retire

Newell Normand has been sheriff of Jefferson Parish since 2007. He has accepted a position at WWL radio, Normand said.

Normand unexpectedly announced that he would be retiring early to take a job as a radio talk show host with WWL. He has appointed Lopinto to take his place until a special election for the position can be held for the job, likely in 2018. Lopinto, 41, has said he plans to run for sheriff in that special election, though other people also are expected to enter the race.

That Normand selected Lopinto, a former Jefferson Parish sheriff's deputy and detective, who became an attorney, to fill in for him isn't a surprise. Normand had been grooming Lopinto to try to take over the department eventually, said state Sen. Danny Martiny, R-Kenner.

"I began sniffing something out awhile ago," said Martiny, an attorney

who has advised and represented the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office since 1980. "Newell would bounce things off Joe that he would not bounce off of me."

Martiny is a close friend of both Normand and Lopinto. Lopinto worked for Martiny's law firm for four years before joining the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office full time as the chief of operations in 2016. Joining Normand's staff meant Lopinto had to leave the Legislature in 2016, six months into his third term.

Lopinto said he took the job with Normand last year in part to be closer to his family. His twins were five years old when he left the Legislature, and he was tired of missing baseball games and dance recitals because of the Legislature's grueling spring schedule in Baton Rouge.

He also has a significant background in law enforcement in the New Orleans area. Lopinto became a sheriff's deputy after attending Brother Martin High School and Loyola University. He was promoted to detective and returned to Loyola to attend law school at night before leaving the department to start a private practice in 2005. In 2007 at the age of 31, he won his first election to the Louisiana House.

Lopinto was considered a rising star in the Legislature for much of his time in Baton Rouge. He was named chairman of the Administration of Criminal Justice committee in the House during his second term, despite only being 35 years old. As the head of that panel, he oversaw most law changes that affect arrests, parole and criminal sentences from 2012 to 2016.

When will Jefferson Parish voters pick a new sheriff?

The Parish Council has 20 days after Normand retires to schedule that contest.

As a legislator, Lopinto was known for being affable, direct and fair with his colleagues. He was willing to let every person on his committee have their say about bills, even if he didn't agree with their point of view. When discussion became too heated between members, he had the ability to calm people down.

"He is somebody who is about doing the right thing," said state Rep. Helena Moreno, D-New Orleans, who served as vice chairwoman of Lopinto's criminal justice committee. Moreno said she didn't always agree with Lopinto, but he was always willing to work with other members, including Democrats. He was also frank when he had a difference of opinion with them, she said.

Lopinto also spent a lot of time trying to build consensus around legislation he wanted to pass. He was willing to compromise on bills -- and accept changes on them that he didn't necessarily like -- in order to make some progress on an issue. In his opinion, it was better to pass legislation that advanced some of his objectives, rather than put forward a bill that wouldn't pass at all.

"I knew what we did was never going to be perfect," Lopinto said in an interview Wednesday.

Lopinto didn't shy away from controversial issues either. He introduced pieces of legislation to allow earlier release of prisoners convicted of nonviolent crimes. He sponsored a bill that would have diverted people from prison to drug treatment as well. Many of the proposals he introduced five years ago were forerunners to the sweeping criminal justice overhaul the Legislature approved this past spring, after he left.

Lopinto was also one of the primary advocates of expanding gun rights in the Legislature. He backed legislation that expanded the list of places where people with conceal carry permits could take their weapons. He was often aligned with the Louisiana Sheriffs Association, and tried to steer millions of dollars in funding toward their operations while in the statehouse.

If Lopinto backed a criminal justice bill, he could often get some version of it passed. In addition to being head of one of the criminal justice committees, his background as a sheriff's deputy and criminal defense attorney meant he understood the practical implications of most criminal justice bills better than most. Many House members trusted his opinion on those matters, said Moreno and Broadwater.

But Lopinto also exhibited an independent streak when necessary. Though he was committee chairman, he could buck the House leadership and Gov. Bobby Jindal when he was unhappy.

During Jindal's final year in office, Lopinto pulled a bill that would have allowed Louisiana to conceal where it was getting its drugs to administer the death penalty. The Jindal administration -- which was having problems getting the drugs through normal channels -- had asked Lopinto to carry the controversial legislation that would have made the drug purchase more secretive. Lopinto went along with the bill for a while, but ended up killing it before the Legislature had a chance to give it final approval.

Like Normand, Lopinto also broke with the GOP and backed Edwards over U.S. Sen. David Vitter, the Republican candidate, in the 2015 gubernatorial runoff. Normand and Vitter have had a long-standing feud and were the heads of competing Jefferson Parish political factions for years. Lopinto's endorsement of Edwards came after a private investigator for the Vitter campaign was caught secretly recording a conversation between Normand, Martiny and two other men at a coffee shop one morning during the gubernatorial campaign.

Still, Lopinto remained loyal to Edwards after the election. He backed Edwards' pick for House Speaker, New Orleans Democrat Walt Leger, over the candidates pushed by Vitter's allies in the House. In the end, House Speaker Taylor Barras, R-New Iberia, ended up beating Leger, leaving Lopinto and other Republicans who had sided with the governor vulnerable.

Sanctuary city policies worry Sheriff Newell Normand

Trump's crackdown has local law enforcement facing a slew of challenges to navigate federal immigration law and stay within the bounds of the U.S. Constitution.

Barras removed Lopinto as chairman of the criminal justice committee after the speaker's election. By the time he left the House a year ago, Lopinto and other Republicans who had been willing to work with Democrats had been largely left out of the Republican leadership's decision-making process.

After working under Normand for a year, Lopinto said he is unlikely to change much about the way the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office operates. "The sheriff's office isn't broken," he said.

Perhaps the biggest shift when Lopinto takes over will be in style. Normand and Lopinto have similar outlooks on law enforcement practices, but their dispositions are quite different. Normand can be a hothead, yelling at press conferences, legislative committees and other public events when he is upset. Lopinto keeps calm, even when things aren't going his way. He doesn't lose his temper easily. Several legislators said one of his greatest strengths is that he remains "level-headed" even when under stress.

"They have very different temperaments," Martiny said.