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Corzine taps Camden lawyer for his staff

By Adrienne Lu

Inquirer Trenton Bureau

William J. Castner Jr., executive director of New Jersey's Assembly Majority Office, was headed for a job as a lawyer in the private sector when he got an offer he couldn't resist.

Castner, 35, of Camden, will become Gov. Corzine's chief counsel today, replacing Edward J. McBride Jr., who will become Corzine's chief of staff. McBride takes the place of Lisa Jackson, who was nominated to head the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

As chief counsel, Castner will help review all legislation to be signed by the governor, draft executive orders, and oversee a team of about 15 lawyers.

"Bill has an exceptional legal mind, and his years of service working in the Legislature will be essential as we look to move forward with statewide economic relief and ethics-reform initiatives in the coming year," Corzine said in a written statement.

Castner has spent seven years working for Assembly Democrats, including the last three at the helm of the majority office, where, he said, he was the youngest director in its history. He also has worked for the nonpartisan Office of Legislative Services and as an attorney with the Fair Share Housing Center, representing the Camden County NAACP.

Castner clerked for former Associate Justice James R. Zazzali of the state Supreme Court and Sylvia B. Pressler, presiding judge for administration of the Appellate Division. He graduated from Rowan University, where he majored in political science; earned a master's degree in public policy from Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics; and earned a law degree at Rutgers-Camden.

After years of working for the Assembly, Castner said, he accepted a job at a law firm because he wanted to use his law degree more. But, he said, "when the governor asks, it's tough to say no."

Castner said he welcomed the opportunity to continue to work on pending matters such as ethics rules and affordable housing.

Looking back on his time with the Assembly, Castner said he was most proud of the Legislature's work on affordable housing, particularly eliminating a loophole in state rules that allowed wealthier communities to pass their affordable-housing obligation on to poorer ones. Other policy highlights included strengthening gun control and preventing a cap on malpractice damages.

A Toms River High School East teacher got Castner interested in politics and public service by involving him in a program that introduced students to local government. Though he had never been particularly interested in national politics, he said attending council meetings through the program convinced him that a person could have an impact locally.

As a first-year law student at Rutgers-Camden, Castner wrote a letter to Assemblyman Joseph J. Roberts Jr. (D., Camden) offering his services. Roberts called Castner, and the two met, eventually leading Castner to work for the Assembly.

Roberts called Castner an "incredible resource to Assembly Democrats and a great adviser and a good friend of mine."

Alluding to Corzine's sometimes rocky relationship with the legislative branch, Roberts said Castner would bring a real understanding and appreciation of the Legislature "that will be invaluable to the governor in advancing his agenda."

Richard Wright, executive director of the Assembly Republicans, called Castner a fierce but fair competitor who fought for his side without letting disagreements become personal.

"It will serve him well, and Gov. Corzine is lucky to get somebody of his caliber," Wright said.

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