

Senate confirms Lioi as federal judge

by Paul Krawzak

WASHINGTON - A long confirmation battle came to an abrupt end Thursday as the Senate approved Stark County Judge Sara E. Lioi's nomination to be a U.S. District Court Judge for Ohio's northern judicial district.

The Senate action followed an Odyssey that included successful efforts to win approval for her in a Senate committee last fall, only to be followed by a political squabble that prevented her from getting a confirmation vote in the Senate before it adjourned at the end of the year.

As a result, President Bush had to re-nominate the Stark County Common Pleas judge again after a new congressional session began in January.

At home in Plain Township when she received news of the confirmation, Lioi, 46, said she was ready to get to work.

"I welcome the challenge," said Lioi, who was celebrating with her mother and a sister. "I love the law and I love administering the cases and controversies that come before me. And I truly, truly look forward to working in the federal court."

In a speech he wrote for her confirmation but did not deliver because it happened so fast, Sen. George

Voinovich, R-Cleveland, praised Lioi not just for having "exceptional legal skills," but also for being involved in civic activities, which he said helps her to "recognize how the law impacts individuals and communities."

As a federal judge, Lioi will hear cases in a 40-county judicial district including Stark, Tuscarawas and Carroll counties. She expects to be assigned to the federal courthouse in Akron, but the federal courthouse in Cleveland is also a possibility.

After the fruitless wait for a confirmation vote last year, Lioi almost got one earlier this week, but it was delayed as a result of a competing legislative priority.

Late Thursday afternoon, word spread that the Senate would vote on her nomination imminently.

The Senate took a break from debate over a national security related bill at 6:36 p.m. to vote on Lioi's nomination, as well as that of John A. Jarvey, a candidate for the federal bench in Iowa.

After a roll call vote lasting 20 minutes, the Senate approved Jarvey 95-0.

Then it was Lioi's turn.

Mispronouncing Lioi's last name, which is correctly pronounced lee-oy, a Senate clerk announced her nomination.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., quickly declared that he was "willing to have a voice vote on this."

Appearing pleasantly surprised, Lioi backer Voinovich said if the Senate was "willing to voice vote it, I'll give up my time (to speak on behalf of Lioi) right now."

At 7 p.m., the Senate voted unanimously to confirm Lioi.

Lioi's nomination never was controversial. She breezed through a confirmation hearing last year. Later, however, it took some effort from former Ohio Republican Sen. Mike DeWine, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, to persuade his fellow committee member Leahy to agree to send her nomination to the full Senate for a vote in the highly partisan atmosphere of the Judiciary Committee.

Expectations that the Senate would confirm her before adjourning last year were dashed when a partisan spat unrelated to Lioi got in the way of a vote.

With her two Labrador retrievers barking in the background, Lioi expressed her gratitude to DeWine and Voinovich for recommending her as a judge, and to Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Avon, for also supporting her.

She received congratulatory phone calls from Voinovich and Brown after the confirmation.

Lioi has been a Common Pleas judge since 1997.

She received her law degree from Ohio State University, and her bachelor's degree from Bowling Green State University.

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