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UPDATE: Beebe nominates Todd Turner as Democratic Party chief

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LITTLE ROCK — Todd Turner, an Arkadelphia attorney who successfully challenged the state's payday lending law, was tapped by Gov. Mike Beebe on Wednesday to be the new chairman of the Arkansas Democratic Party.

During a luncheon with the Political Animals Club at the Governor's Mansion, Beebe announced Turner was his choice to lead the party. If approved by the party's state committee at its Feb. 7 meeting, Turner would head the Democrats while Republicans are being led by a sponsor of the 1999 check cashing law he helped repeal.

"I think it's a great opportunity for a country lawyer like me," Turner said Wednesday afternoon.

Turner, 42, will lead the party as it prepares for next year's elections, when Beebe and U.S. Sen. Blanche Lincoln will both be running for re-election. Democrats hold all of the statewide offices, five of the state's six seats in Congress, and a majority of the legislative seats in Arkansas.

"I see him as someone who can respond to questions or to the normal rhetoric that you see in a partisan campaign, whether it's a local legislative race or U.S. senate race or any other race for that matter," Beebe told reporters after the announcement. "I also think he's got experience in party building, in recruiting good candidates and helping them and educating them."

The position became vacant when former legislator Bill Gwatney was fatally shot at the

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party office in downtown Little Rock in August. Former U.S. Sen. David Pryor has been acting as party chairman since then. Beebe said he was grateful to Pryor for his leadership.

Beebe would not say if he had offered the post to anyone else before approaching Turner.

Turner has more than 15 years' experience as a member of the Clark County Democratic Party Executive Committee, and has been county chairman since 2007.

A native of De Queen, he graduated from Ouachita Baptist University and received his law degree from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Law. He served as an officer in the Arkansas Army National Guard and has served as a deputy prosecutor.

He currently is on the board and executive committee of the Arkansas Better Business Bureau, and has written several articles on consumer law issues.

Turner's name was the only one submitted for the post by the deadline late Tuesday afternoon, said Mariah Hattah, the state Democratic Party's executive director.

Turner represented plaintiffs in a lawsuit that challenged the 1999 Check Cashers' Act. The state Supreme Court last year tossed out that law, ruling that it allowed payday lenders to charge triple and maybe even quadruple-digit interest rates in violation of the state constitution.

An ironic twist to Turner's appointment is that the state Republican Party voted last month to elect Doyle Webb former state senator from Benton, as the state GOP's chairman. While in the Senate, Webb sponsored the 1 Check Cashers Act that Turner successfully fought in the courts.

Webb said he believed the fact was probably just a coincidence and said he wouldn't have sponsored the law then-Attorney General Mark Pryor had advised lawmakers it was potentially unconstitutional. Webb said he had to meet Turner at some point.

"I don't know Mr. Turner but I look forward to working with him and having healthy discussions that will help move Arkansas forward," Webb said.

Beebe said Turner's work on the case did not factor into his decision to back the attorney for the party post.

Turner said he didn't want to get into specifics on his plans for the party until he's approved by the state's committee. Turner said he hoped to live up to the legacy Gwatney left as chairman.

"If I can do half as good a job as he did, I'll be happy," Turner said.

For more information see Thursday's *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

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