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✉ AGENN@LIBN.COM

📞 631.913.4241

🐦 @ADINAGENN

Hochul prepares for spotlight as Cuomo steps down

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
AND ADINA GENN

Kathy Hochul, a western New York Democrat, is already known to Long Island business leaders as the state's lieutenant government. Still, many across the state are unfamiliar with Hochul, even after she's served in this role over the last six or so years.

On Wednesday, she began reintroducing herself to the public as she prepared to take the reins of power after Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced he would resign from office.

Hochul, 62, in less than two weeks will become the state's first female governor, following a remarkable transition period in which Cuomo has said he will stay on and work to ease her into a job that he dominated over his three terms in office.

She stayed out of public sight Tuesday but said in a statement that she was "prepared to lead." Hochul planned to hold her first news conference Wednesday afternoon at the State Capitol, in the very room where Cuomo became a familiar face to people across the U.S. and beyond for his televised briefings on New York's fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

Cuomo, 63, announced Tuesday that he would step down rather than face a likely impeachment trial over allegations that he sexually harassed at least 11 women, including one who accused him of groping her breast.

Cuomo has continued to deny that he touched anyone inappropriately, and said his instinct was to fight back against claims he felt were unfair or fabricated. But he said that with the state still in a pandemic crisis, it was best for him to step aside so the state's leaders could "get back to governing."

That job will fall to Hochul, who served briefly in Congress representing a Buffalo-area district, but purposely kept a modest profile as lieutenant governor in a state where Cuomo commanded — and demanded — the spotlight.

A seasoned veteran of retail politics, Hochul shares some of Cuomo's centrist politics, but is a stylistic contrast with a governor famous for his love of steamrolling opponents and holding grudges, state political veterans say. She's well-liked by colleagues, who say voters shouldn't confuse her quiet approach under Cuomo with a lack of confidence or competence.

"Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul will be an extraordinary governor," Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, another upstate political veteran, told reporters at the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday. "She understands the complexities and needs of our state, having been both a congresswoman and having been lieutenant governor for the last several years."

Long Island business leaders give Hochul



AP Photo

Long Island business leaders say Kathy Hochul is very familiar with the region.

high marks, noting that that she is well-versed on the challenges and strengths of the region.

Matt Cohen, president and CEO of Long Island Association, the region's largest business group, said that Hochul "has been a friend to Long Island during her entire tenure and has played a crucial role in supporting our region's economy, especially as we confronted the challenges with COVID-19, and we look forward to a continued relationship with her as our great state's first woman governor."

State Sen. Anna Kaplan, who chairs the Committee on Commerce, Economic Development and Small Business, said Hochul knows the region well.

Hochul "has often been called an honorary Long Islander because she spends so much time here fighting for issues that matter to us, and standing up for small businesses in our community," she said in a statement.

These are "extraordinary times," Kyle Strober, executive director of ABLI, said, and they "require a steady hand and a clear vision of what the state needs — from public health to our economy."

Hochul, he said, "has demonstrated that

strength of character during her tenure and the business community will welcome her presence in the governor's mansion."

Kevin Law, co-chair of Long Island's Regional Economic Development Council, said that he spent the last seven years working with Hochul.

"I have toured numerous businesses, vineyards and public works projects with her," he said. "She knows more about Long Island than most Long Islanders, and I am confident she will do a great job as governor and continue to be a supporter of our region."

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union described Hochul as a "strong and smart leader with the right values," adding its expectations that she would "protect and advance the needs of working people during these extraordinary times."

It remains to be seen how involved Cuomo will be in state government over the next two weeks, or how he'll manage handing over authority — something he rarely ceded during his time in office.

His circle of advisers has shrunk, but his closest aide and policymaking partner — Melissa DeRosa — made a surprise return to Cuomo's side after having announced her

resignation from the administration Sunday. The governor's office said she will remain in her job as secretary to the governor until Cuomo departs.

Leaders in the state legislature have yet to say whether they plan on dropping an impeachment investigation that has been ongoing since March, and which had been expected to conclude in the coming weeks.

In addition to examining his conduct with women, lawyers hired by the state Assembly had been investigating whether the administration manipulated data on COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes and whether Cuomo improperly got help from his staff writing a book about the pandemic.

Republicans have urged the Democratic-controlled legislature to go ahead with impeachment, possibly to prevent Cuomo from running for office again.

As Assemblyman Jarett Gandolfo, a Republican from Bayport put it, put it, "Cuomo still has much to answer for."

Still, he said, that he "hope[s] to work together in a bipartisan fashion on behalf of all New Yorkers."

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