

LEAVITT SOFTENS GUN-CONTROL STAND

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Gun-control measures that Gov. Mike Leavitt once viewed as so urgent he pressed for an emergency session of the Legislature now have been shoved far down on his agenda.

In fact, the governor said Thursday that he has no plans in the regular legislative session beginning Jan. 17 to push gun-restriction bills, including a ban on legally concealed weapons in schools and churches.

"If the issue comes up, it will be initiated" by legislators, Leavitt said at his monthly KUED-TV news conference.

"You've got a citizens initiative, and this has been adequately debated," Leavitt added. "I don't intend to spend a lot more time on it unless they [lawmakers] bring it up."

That was a different message from the one the governor sounded just this summer, when he talked of a window of opportunity to pass gun-safety legislation in the wake of two random shooting sprees in Utah.

Republicans, who control the Legislature, quashed the governor's plan for a special session in October, which helped fuel a petition initiative campaign to put the schools-and-churches gun ban on the November 2000 ballot.

But some gun-restriction supporters contend that criticisms of Leavitt by conservative members of his own Republican Party, including legislators, have spooked the governor from taking a lead on the emotional issue.

House Speaker Marty Stephens on Tuesday ended four weeks of speculation that he might challenge Leavitt for the Republican gubernatorial nomination next year -- a potential challenge Leavitt insisted was largely driven by his willingness to compromise on two main issues: wilderness and gun rights.

Stephens and Leavitt insisted no deal on guns or any policy matter was involved in the speaker's opting out of the race and their public reconciliation. But now the governor's tepid approach to the gun issue has some wondering about bargaining-chip politics. "There may not have been an express agreement," says gun-control advocate Steve Gunn. "But I think the governor feels chastened enough by what occurred that he is not going to precipitate another" confrontation with the conservative wing of the GOP.

"I had hoped when the governor emerged [from the Stephens challenge] as the clear victor he might feel he had the strength to undertake some" gun-restriction initiatives in the Legislature, said Gunn, of Utahns Against Gun Violence. "I see now that he has no stomach for such a fight."

Leavitt said his stand remains strong against allowing legally concealed weapons in schools and churches. But he said he is a pragmatist who recognizes it takes a majority of legislators -- or a vote of the people -- to pass laws.

"It's pretty clear to me that just my raising the issue again is not going to do anything unless they [lawmakers] are prepared to act on it, and I hope that they will," said the governor. "If I'm asked, I'll respond.

"If it doesn't come up, I don't know how I could have been more clear about it."

House Democratic Leader Dave Jones isn't ready to call it quits for a legislatively enacted ban on concealed weapons in churches and schools. He is refiling his bill from last year to impose such a prohibition.

"I would hope when my bill comes up, [Leavitt] will stand up and be one of the supporters," Jones said. "It was an important issue before, and it is an important issue now."

But Jones said it is his view that Leavitt "received a real strong message from the extreme right in his own party: The public be damned; he needed to back off it."

The Salt Lake City Democrat also speculates that "the governor's backing off on guns might be another part of the deal" with Stephens and conservatives.

Still, Jones said he thinks some gun restrictions will pass in the Legislature, including prohibiting gun sales to people convicted of certain violent misdemeanors, and trying to keep weapons out of the hands of mentally ill people who could be dangerous to themselves or others.

With strong public sentiment on the side of gun restrictions, "the Republicans have to do some things," Jones said.

Leavitt said he continues to support restricting gun sales to violent misdemeanants and mentally ill people, and he has proposed funding such measures in his budget.

But he suggested that on those matters, too, he will follow the lead of the Legislature.

Asked whether he views any gun-restriction bills as priority items, Leavitt sidestepped the question. "I have one major priority this year. And that's to fund education."