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State Sen. Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) was elected Senate president Monday during a tense closed-door caucus of the upper house's Democratic majority at the Statehouse in Trenton.

Earlier in the afternoon, Assemblywoman Sheila Oliver (D-Essex) was elected Assembly speaker by the lower house's Democratic majority.

Oliver will become the first African-American woman and the second woman to serve as Assembly speaker. She will be the second African-American and the second woman to hold the post. She and Sweeney will assume their new and powerful positions when the Legislature reorganizes on Jan. 12.

Sweeney, 60, of West Deptford, a senator for eight years, will become the third most powerful official in state government and Oliver, 57, of East Orange, a legislator since 2004, will be the fourth most powerful. They will also be the Democrats who will deal with Republican Gov.-elect Chris Christie when he takes office Jan. 19

"Our state is truly sitting at a crossroads," Sweeney told reporters. "We're all aware of the challenges New Jersey faces, and I'm prepared to take them head-on. I share the people's

desire for fresh perspectives and new ideas."

Sweeney will replace Sen. Richard Codey (D-Essex) who held the post since 2002. Oliver will replace Assemblyman Joseph Roberts (D-Camden) who has held the post for four years but opted not to seek re-election to the lower house.

Sen. Barbara Buono (D-Middlesex), the chairwoman of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee, was selected Senate Democratic majority leader and Assemblyman Joseph Cryan (D-Union) was selected as Assembly Democratic majority leader.

Sweeney and Oliver were elected through an arrangement involving South Jersey Democratic leader George Norcross and Essex County Democratic leader Joe DiVincenzo. In return for North Jersey senators supporting Sweeney for Senate president, South Jersey Assembly members supported Oliver's election.

"Our new leadership team and caucus not only reflects New Jersey's great diversity, but shares a passion for working to make our state more affordable for all who call it home," Oliver said. "I thank my colleagues for their confidence in me to lead our caucus during this time of great change. I can assure you that we are deeply committed to working with Gov.-elect Christie and our Senate counterparts, and I pledge that the core values that define Assembly Democrats will remain our top priority."

Cryan bumped Assemblywoman Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-Mercer) as majority leader. In a move to bring Middlesex County into the Sweeney camp, Buono gained the majority leader position and Assemblyman John Wisniewski (D-Middlesex) will replace Cryan as state Democratic Party chairman.

Oliver will be the first woman speaker since Marion West Higgins (R-Bergen) in 1965. She will be the first African-American speaker since the Rev. S. Howard Woodson (D-Mercer) in 1974 and 1975.

"Speakers West Higgins and Woodson broke historic barriers, and I am honored to follow in

their footsteps," Oliver said. "And while I will bring a new perspective to the speaker's post, I aim to follow Speaker Roberts' tradition of fairness and example as a consensus builder."

Codey said the Senate caucus got ugly at points but concluded, "I wish them all the best as they take over the helm of the 214th Legislature," Codey said of Sweeney and Oliver. "We have a lot of extraordinary challenges that lie ahead and I look forward to working cooperatively with the new leadership to help tackle the pressing problems facing our state. It's been a great honor to serve as leader of the Senate Democratic majority (and full Senate) for the past eight years. This has, without question, been one of the greatest experiences of my life and I'm proud of the many progressive accomplishments we have made on behalf of the residents of New Jersey."

While Senate president, Codey served a year as governor, following the resignation of Gov. James McGreevey in 2005.

Gov. Jon Corzine, who will leave office a week after Sweeney and Oliver assume their new roles, said, "Both of these elected leaders are to be commended for their willingness to take on the substantial challenges facing the great state of New Jersey. I am confident that all of New Jersey will join me in supporting Senate President-Elect Sweeney and Speaker-Elect Oliver in the considerable task they face as they work toward our mutual goal of making our state an even better place to live, work, and raise a family."

Corzine added, "I also want to extend my appreciation to Senate President Richard Codey and Assembly Speaker Joe Roberts for their counsel, support, and the fine working relationship we have shared over the past four years. Together we accomplished much for the people of New Jersey, and I am confident the new leadership will carry on that legacy."

Roberts said, "This exciting new leadership team not only makes history, but is also committed to an even better future for New Jersey and its residents. I'm confident this team will build upon our party's many past successes to make New Jersey a better place to live."

Cryan said, "Creating new jobs and opportunities for New Jersey's working families and protecting our children and most vulnerable remain our priorities. With this new leadership team in place, we will protect the values important to hard working New Jerseyans and ensure what advances is in their best interest."

Four new members participated the caucus where the new leadership team was selected, including Angel Fuentes and Donald Norcross (both D-Camden), Craig Coughlin (D-Middlesex), and Charles Mainor (D-Hudson).

During the summer and early autumn, Republican legislators re-elected Sen. Tom Kean (R-Union) as Senate minority leader and Assemblyman Alex DeCroce (R-Morris) as Assembly minority leader.