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National Libertarians elect Utahn as the No. 2 official

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A large third party elected a Utahn Sunday as its No. 2 official.

The Libertarian Party National Convention elected Hugh Butler of Salt Lake City as its national vice chairman for a two-year term - which likely puts him in line to become the party's national chairman in the 2000 presidential election year."We want to take the party to the next level. It's not just fighting to survive anymore, and it's no longer a start-up organization. We want to help it build and have success," Butler told the Deseret News.

Butler, president of Computer Consultants Corp., which makes computer software for credit unions nationally, had served as the party's national treasurer for five years. That had also made him a member of the party's four-person national executive committee.

"At first, it was constantly a fight just to survive," he said of his five years as treasurer. "But we're on solid enough footing now that we spend our time on strategic planning, and not in survival mode."

Butler - who is also a candidate for Salt Lake County treasurer this year and has run unsuccessfully in Utah for U.S. senator, Salt Lake County commissioner and state treasurer - said he has tried to manage the national party's finances the same way the party wants the federal government to run.

"We pre-fund projects and only spend each dollar once," he said.

"We take our dollars and confirm them to projects so they are untouchable for other purposes, and put them in interest bearing accounts," he said.

Such planning allowed the party to finish its 1996 presidential campaign with a small surplus and out of debt - unlike other major parties that had large debts, even though they accepted public financing from taxpayers that Libertarians refuse, he said.

"Imagine if such a model were to be adopted by government: no fund-ing, no project," he wrote in a campaign brochure for the convention. "One dollar spent once for each activity. No long-term debt. No deficit spending. Promises made and kept."

Butler faced a little excitement in what he had thought would be an uncontested race for vice chairman.

When Gene Cisewski lost his bid against David Bergland for national chairman, Cisewski loudly and publicly considered running against Butler for vice chair. Cisewski's allies won a delay in the scheduled vote on that race Saturday to buy Cisewski time to mount a campaign.

Cisewski ended up refusing his nomination from the floor on Sunday after Bergland had worked out a deal to hire Cisewski as the party's full-time director. With that, the convention elected Butler as vice chair by acclamation.

The vice chairmanship is seen by the party as a stepping stone to becoming the national chair - and Butler said he will likely run for that top spot in two years.

Butler said 300 Libertarians hold offices nationwide, such as small-town mayors and county commissioners (but none in Utah). He said 28,000 people nationally made donations to the party last year, but he says "millions and millions of people have voted for Libertarian candidates."

In 1996, the party's presidential candidate, Harry Browne, finished fifth nationally behind Democrat Bill Clinton, Republican Bob Dole, Reform Party candidate Ross Perot and Green Party candidate Ralph Nader. Browne had 485,798 votes - or half of 1 percent of those cast in the race.

The 27-year-old Libertarian Party - which pushes for a minimal amount of government and a maximum amount of personal choice - has had presidential candidates who finished as high as third.