

# An Idaho first?

**CHRIS CARLSON** *The Carlson Chronicle*

There's an interesting political experiment underway in Idaho's new, sprawling 7th Legislative District that encompasses all of Idaho, Clearwater, and Shoshone counties and a slice of southeastern Bonner county.

The "incumbent" in the state senate race is Sheryl Nuxoll, an accountant and farmer/rancher who hails from Cottonwood. As the Republican she has to be considered the favorite even though some consider her to be a single issue candidate. She has long been active in Idaho's "Life" movement.

Given how conservative Idaho County is, and how Catholic the Cottonwood/Greencreek area is her strong stance is a decided, perhaps even decisive, plus.

Her opposition is a popular and talented three term Shoshone County commissioner, Jon Cantamessa, who runs a family grocery business in Wallace. What makes this race a political experiment is Cantamessa is running as an Independent. According to Idaho's chief election officer, Secretary of State Ben Ysursa, an independent has never been elected to the Idaho Legislature.

When the personable 60-year-old Idaho native first ran for the county commission he did run as an Independent. In his case, then, there is a precedent for such a move. In his two subsequent races though he ran as a "business Democrat" and deliberately identified himself with Benewah County's long-serving conservative Democrat commissioner, Jack Buell, who is also a good friend.

Cantamessa recognizes that there is a significant challenge to running as an Independent inasmuch as it invites suspicions from partisans of both parties and ensures there is no party organization of any kind to provide support. Nonetheless, he candidly concedes that in trying to introduce himself to folks in Clearwater, Idaho and Bonner counties who have never heard of him, if there were a "D" behind his name, many voters would go no further.

Cantamessa is clearly what former four-term Idaho Governor Cecil D. Andrus would call a "lunch-bucket" Democrat, one who knows the importance of having an economy that creates jobs and keeps growing. He also knows resource conversion, turning minerals into metals for use in computers, trees into lumber for houses, and wheat into flour for bread is what brings new dollars into an economy.

Thus his candidacy is built around economic issues in contradistinction to Nuxoll who he correctly characterizes as being more involved with the social issue of abortion than the economic challenges facing the constituency.

He knows though that in today's Idaho too many voters associate the word "Democrat" with liberalism and environmentalism. Explaining why he is neither would constantly have him off message in regards to why he seeks the senate seat.

So, he made a carefully calculated strategic decision to run as an independent hoping such a designation would give him a better chance to make the case for his candidacy to the many voters in Idaho and Clearwater counties who are unfamiliar with him.

This is a sad commentary on the state of the Democratic party in Idaho, but even former Senate Democratic Minority Leader Marguerite McLaughlin, from Orofino, told Cantamessa she thought he was doing the correct thing. Yes, she would have preferred he run as a D, but she understood and could not fault his reasoning.

The numbers alone also make Cantamessa an underdog. Idaho County has 25 percent more people than Shoshone (16, 267 vs. 12, 765—2010 census), and 8230 voted in the 2008 presidential election as opposed to 5,666 in Shoshone County. Even more significantly, in Idaho county in 2008 5,895 of those votes were for John McCain's presidential bid.

By any measure Jon Cantamessa is the kind of candidate Idaho voters have historically supported. He has earned his spurs by long and competent service not just as a commissioner but as an active community leader serving on the local Chamber board, the Wallace school board, the EDC board, the Panhandle Health District board and he heads the public lands subcommittee of the Association of Idaho counties.

A graduate of the University of Washington, he and Iris, his wife of 46 years, have three adult children two of whom are Vandals. A thoughtful, articulate person with a reputation for diligence and doing his homework, in any other race he would be a clear favorite.

He is running his campaign on a shoe-string budget of \$10,000 and is relying on the personal contacts he makes going door to door in towns like Grangeville and Orofino. If anyone can pull off being the first Independent, he's the one.

Questions like who will he caucus with and how will committee assignments be made are all premature. Precedents will be established, but he has to get to Boise first. We'll know in less than a month.

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