

Motherhood, Apple Pie and Economic Growth

By Chuck Malloy, Idaho Politics Weekly

Megan Ronk is a mother who wants her two young sons, ages 5 and 2, to explore the world, as she has done.

“But I always wanted to come back to Idaho, and in that respect I’ve been very fortunate. I’ve been able to pursue my dreams here,” she said. “Selfishly, I want that for my boys.”

Her hopes are not unique for Idaho mothers. But unlike most, she’s in a position to help shape Idaho’s future as the new director of the Idaho Department of Commerce. She’s the first woman to serve as director in the department’s nearly 30-year history, but she downplays that aspect. She’s more interested in the challenges of working to build a better Idaho.

“The most exciting part of this job is we have the opportunity each and every day to sell the state – whether to existing Idaho businesses wishing to expand, companies looking for a new place to call home, or to our tourism clientele,” she said.

The state has plenty of selling points, such as a low-cost business environment, a predictable tax structure, tax incentives for new and existing businesses and workforce talent. There are problems, particularly with low wages and widespread under-employment. But Ronk sees community colleges as part of the solution. The Chobani yogurt plant in Twin Falls, one of the department’s biggest home runs in recent years, probably wouldn’t be there without the help of the College of Southern Idaho. North Idaho College and the College of Western Idaho are poised to provide similar help to companies in their areas.

“When we call our contacts and say, ‘here’s the company, here’s the need and they need x-number for certification,’ the community colleges deliver,” Ronk said.

Ronk brings a different style to the department, and not just in terms of gender. Over the years, directors have come from the private sector – people who have had success in various business ventures. Ronk’s experience is primarily in state government, serving as director of the Idaho Meth Project and as a policy adviser to former Gov. Dirk Kempthorne. She also was a strategic projects manager for Blue Cross of Idaho.

But Ronk, the department’s Chief Operating Officer during Jeff Sayer’s four years as director, is well familiar with the department’s operations. She has been at the center of the agency’s business expansion and recruiting efforts, travel and tourism promotion, international marketing and interagency collaboration.

Her appointment is not well received in all corners. Wayne Hoffman, director of the Idaho Freedom Foundation, says he has nothing against Ronk, “but that is not a measure of success. The measure of success is, do you know what it takes to run a business? Do you know what it takes to meet a payroll? It would be nice to have a person who understands small business.”

Hoffman says that Accelerate Idaho and other programs within the department reflect a “big-government approach that Gov. Otter and Lt. Gov. (Brad) Little have embraced. They have the notion that government solves all problems and the Department of Commerce is an extension of that viewpoint.”

Little, not surprisingly, offers a different view. “I always get a kick out of people who think Gov. Butch Otter and I are a couple of big government guys,” he said. “If we thought we could get by without government in it, we’d probably be all over it. But you have to compete. If you go to Texas, they just write checks to companies.”

The Idaho Department of Commerce, he said, is “thrifty and compact” compared to other states in the region. Its role is to serve existing businesses, new enterprises and economic development efforts throughout the state.

As for Ronk’s qualifications, “Everybody who has worked with Megan both inside and outside the Department of Commerce were incredibly supportive of her when we went through the interview process,” Little said.

“When Jeff came here, we were not on the trajectory we are now. Jeff and Megan put us on that trajectory,” Little added. “She understands economic development because she’s been on the front lines. And from where she was in the office, all the problems ended up on her desk.”

There will be plenty of time to evaluate her job performance. But the true measure of her success could come some 20 years into the future when her sons decide if Idaho is the place they want to live and raise their families.

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