

Robert Duffy to lead Andrew Cuomo's transition team

Brian Sharp • Staff writer • November 12, 2010

An early indication of the influence that Lt. Gov.-elect Robert Duffy and western New York interests will have in the Cuomo administration came Thursday as the outgoing Rochester mayor was tapped to lead the transition.

In addition, Gov.-elect Andrew Cuomo named Wegmans Food Markets Inc. CEO Danny Wegman; New York Farm Bureau President Dean Norton of Elba, Genesee County; and Assembly Minority Leader Brian Kolb, R-Canandaigua, to a committee that will help select new staff for state agencies leading economic development and job creation efforts.

Cuomo also named Xerox chairwoman and CEO Ursula Burns and, from Buffalo, M&T Bank CEO Robert Wilmers and Mayor Byron Brown to a 20-member council of economic and fiscal advisers to serve throughout the coming five weeks and the next four years.

"They may be a smaller percentage of the whole group, but they are not bashful people," Brian Sampson, executive director of pro-business lobbying group Unshackle Upstate, said of the western New York representatives. "They have been around long enough. They have seen what works. They have seen what doesn't work.

"It's a good list."

Duffy released a statement that he was "honored and humbled" by the appointment to lead an effort that "features some of our state's most accomplished and respected leaders." He deferred further comment to a city spokesman.

In the coming days, Cuomo plans to announce additional transition teams in other areas, and add to the 31 members already named to the economic development and labor team announced Thursday. That team will begin meeting next week and, Norton said, has been told to plan on at least three sessions in New York City.

If Duffy's mayoral transition five years ago is any indicator, "he was involved in every meeting," said Sandy Parker, president and CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance and co-founder of Unshackle Upstate, who worked on the Duffy transition. "He ran the whole series of transition team meetings. It was very interactive ... that's his style."

The transition teams will serve as think tanks to vet ideas, policies and people and to suggest options. Duffy's role will be not only to orchestrate the transition but also to make personal phone calls to recruit new talent, campaign officials said. Duffy has said his experience as police chief and mayor will serve him well in knowing what to look for in an executive.

"The importance of this decision is it means Cuomo is willing to have (Duffy) play an integral role," said Peter Galie, a professor at Canisius College who has studied the role of lieutenant governors in New York.

The economic and fiscal advisers, meanwhile, will assist the administration with economic and budget policy throughout the term.

Xerox spokesman Bill McKee said, in a statement, that Burns was chosen because of her background and business knowledge and "feels she could be an asset to the state in helping the governor build a better climate for business in New York."

Back home, Duffy spokesman Gary Walker said the city administration has assembled priorities for the rest of the year and "we all have our marching

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orders."

Though the time Duffy must commit to the transition is impossible to predict, Walker said: "When the mayor needs to be mayor, he is going to be mayor." That is how it's been the past five years, he continued, "and it's not going to change in the next five weeks."

Kolb said he is encouraged that Cuomo has selected a bipartisan group. At the top of the transition team with Duffy will be Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney, a Republican who endorsed Cuomo.

"It shouldn't matter the initials after your name," Kolb said. "There's enough experience and brain power on both sides of the aisle."

The list of transition team members also includes political powerbrokers from both parties, as well as donors big and small. State campaign records show Wegman gave Cuomo-Duffy \$10,000 during the campaign, while Wilmers forked over \$250 for Republican gubernatorial nominee and Buffalo businessman Carl Paladino.

Cuomo phoned Kolb on Thursday morning to ask him to take part in the team, while the minority leader was having coffee in his kitchen with his wife. Kolb said he hopes the appointment is not ceremonial but allows him to put his private-sector experience to good use — something he has been offering Albany for years.

"I will work with anyone who wants to move the state forward," said Kolb, who has worked for large and small companies and is a co-founder of North American Filter Corp.

For Norton, whom Duffy invited in a phone call Wednesday, the starting point is "to see what their direction is, and what their thoughts are for the various departments ... and see how they fit.

"With the precarious budget situation that we are in, a lot of these departments have been cut to the bare bones and can't be cut anymore," Norton said, adding that he hopes the Cuomo team will identify other areas in the budget to find savings.

The Cuomo administration will take office needing to close a projected \$9 billion deficit in the coming year budget.

Combine the economic challenges with the agenda that Cuomo has set and this transition "will be more intensive than they have been in the past," Sampson said.

"I don't think this is a situation where you can apply a Band-aid and hope that things will get better. This is something that is going to require surgery, and a little bit of recovery time."

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Includes reporting by staff writer Jill Terreri.

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