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Meet some key Corbett cabinet picks: Patrick Henderson, Energy executive

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By Sean D. Hamill, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Patrick Henderson

When Patrick Henderson started his college education at Bloomsburg University in 1992, he thought he wanted to be a sociologist.

"But I hated the classes, and the professors were never accessible," he recalls. "So I switched to political science and I loved it right away."

Now, after 14 years as an aide to state Sen. Mary Jo White, R-Venango, holding the influential position of director of the environmental resources and energy committee she has chaired for 11 years, Mr. Henderson, still only 36, gets to work on his passion at an even higher level. Two weeks ago, Gov. Tom Corbett tapped him to become the first person to hold the new post of energy executive.

The energy executive will be "the person who has the ear of the governor on energy policy," said Mr. Corbett's spokesman, Kevin Harley, "so that there's one voice on energy issues."

Creating the senior adviser position was part of Mr. Corbett's energy policy outlined during his campaign. Some speculated it might be a move to re-create the old energy office that former Gov. Tom Ridge disbanded in 1995.

But Mr. Henderson said directly: "It's not going to be the energy office."

On the other hand, he noted, "This is not going to be a job where I sit here and one person makes energy policy."

He will work with the various state agencies that deal with different aspects of energy issues, primarily the Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

With his office on the same floor as the governor's, he will frequently advise Mr. Corbett directly, but his day-to-day work goes through the governor's director of policy and planning, Jennifer Branstetter.

Mr. Henderson is charged with handling issues involving all types of energy, but he acknowledges that issues surrounding Marcellus Shale natural gas "will dominate the conversation. There's no way around that."

The idea of the post appeals to leaders from industry and environmental groups.

"By creating the position in the governor's office, we're giving energy the high profile it deserves," said George Ellis, president of the Pennsylvania Coal Association. "Right now, it's fragmented across departments."

John Walliser, vice president of legal and government affairs for the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, agreed.

"I do think it's useful because you have so many things going on in the state with energy and there's not a natural conduit for

them. This might give those agencies a point person to go to," he said.

There is less agreement about the person the governor appointed to the position.

Environmental and industry leaders all say that Mr. Peterson is a hard worker and very thorough. But they don't agree if he can be trusted to see both sides.

"Patrick is very cautious," said Lou D'Amico, president of the Pennsylvania Independent Oil and Gas Association, of his years working with Mr. Henderson in the Senate. "I think he deals with all issues and all sides."

Kathryn Klaber, president of the Marcellus Shale Coalition, said: "He's someone who is reliable and trusted by many folks."

Though some environmental leaders, including Mr. Walliser, found Mr. Henderson to be fair-minded, Jan Jarrett, president of PennFuture, an advocacy group, had a difficult time dealing with him when he worked in the Senate.

"His views tended to be very industry friendly," she said, a view expressed by half of the six environmental leaders contacted for this story.

Mr. Henderson said he always tried to be available to talk with leaders from any point of view, and he blames Ms. Jarrett's feelings on her own actions.

"Frankly, she was not a welcome individual in Sen. White's office the last seven years because she would engage in personal attacks," he said.

Ms. Jarrett would only say that "our relationship could be improved."

Moreover, Mr. Henderson said, "I've always been cognizant of who the boss is, and it's not Pat Henderson. For 14 years it was Sen. White, and now I have a new boss."

Mr. Henderson grew up on a farm near Montoursville, Lycoming County, about 20 miles east of Williamsport. His parents -- his father was a doctor and his mother a nurse -- leased most of the land out to a local farmer to use, but he raised various animals there growing up and showed them in the local fairs.

After college, an uncle helped him get an internship with then-candidate Mary Jo White, who earned his loyalty when she let him live in her home during her first campaign. She made him a legislative aide when she was elected.

"He's like a family member to me. I've watched him grow up, get married," Ms. White said. "He's intensely loyal and very thorough. Even when answering a constituent letter, he would get in-depth. I'm going to miss him a lot."

Mr. Henderson met his wife, Erin, when she worked as an aide for then-Sen. David "Chip" Brightbill. They now have two young children.

He said during his 40-minute interview in mid-December with Mr. Corbett, a die-hard Steelers fan, that he had to confess his "one flaw."

"I told him I'm an Eagles fan," he said. "He asked me, 'Then, who is your second favorite team?' But I had to tell him if you have a favorite like I do, you can't have a second favorite."

As Ms. White said: Intensely loyal.

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