

NEW CHIEF OF STAFF MAY BRIDGE A GAP AND PUT LEAVITT BACK IN THE LOOP

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Ted Stewart is Gov. Mike Leavitt's new right-hand man. Literally.

Armed with unassailable conservative credentials, Stewart will work at shoring up the governor's sagging political right flank.

As Leavitt's new chief of staff, Stewart is perhaps the most powerful appointed official in the executive branch of state government, overseeing its day-to-day operations.

His appointment was announced and made effective last week. He steps into a job that has been in flux for months, with two short-term occupants. And he arrives at a time when there is a widening gulf between Leavitt and the Republican Party's right wing -- particularly rural conservatives.

Leavitt spokeswoman Vicki Varela denies Stewart was picked because he is a conservative with strong ties to rural elected officials. But she acknowledges it couldn't hurt.

"That turned out to be gravy," says Varela. "That wasn't the determining factor, but it will help {smooth relations with rural conservatives}. There's no question."

It could be a big job.

Consider these developments:

In a display of public discord rare for elected Utah Republicans, Congressman Chris Cannon criticized Leavitt for vetoing legislation that would have given state support for lawsuits opposing the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Cannon even called on lawmakers to override Leavitt's veto.

The Legislature's powerful Rural Caucus -- sometimes called the "Cowboy Caucus" -- continually challenges Leavitt on policy issues from last year's gas-tax increase to open-space preservation initiatives and child-care regulation.

The governor's vocal stand on restricting Utah's wide-open concealed weapons laws has placed him at odds with gun-rights advocates, including Utah Republican Party Chairman Rob Bishop.

Stewart -- perhaps warming to the spin control that is part of his new job -- downplays the rift.

"Urban versus rural is one of those natural dividing lines," he says. "It's nothing new. There's a natural tension there."

But Stewart, who grew up on a dairy farm in Weston, Idaho, makes no secret about where his sympathies lie.

"Small-town rural America is a very special part of our country. It is a part of our society that deserves special attention, particularly when government has policies that endanger it," Stewart says.

"To the extent I can, I have a responsibility to bridge {urban and rural} interests," he adds. "My goal is to ensure that the governor's agenda is successfully carried out."

The 49-year-old Stewart is an attorney who has for the past five years run the Utah Department of Natural Resources. There, he oversaw a sweeping reorganization aimed in part at appeasing farmers and ranchers upset with wildlife management policies. He also proved adept

at dealing with the Legislature's cowboy-boot-shod Rural Caucus, which keeps a tight rein on natural resources issues.

Stewart ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate in 1992, finishing a close third in the Republican convention behind Bob Bennett and Joe Cannon, both of whom siphoned personal fortunes to campaign.

In a fiery convention speech, Stewart vowed to "rip the mask" of moderation from "liberal" Democrat Wayne Owens, a longtime supporter of wilderness in Utah.

Prior to that unsuccessful campaign, Stewart served for seven years on the Public Service Commission, where he honed the art of compromise and negotiation on mammoth utility cases, including the merger of Utah Power & Light with Portland-based PacifiCorp.

Stewart's political career began in 1980, when he worked on Rep. Jim Hansen's first congressional campaign. After Hansen defeated veteran Democrat Gunn McKay, Stewart went to Washington as the Republican's administrative aide.

In that job, he helped craft the 1984 bill designating 740,000 acres of Forest Service lands in Utah as protected wilderness. The deal was cut one sweaty August day in the Kamas office of the Forest Service as Stewart, a representative of then Sen. Jake Garn and environmentalist Dick Carter attacked a map with red pencils.

"Back in those days, environmentalists were a bit more willing to talk," Stewart recalls now.

While adhering to conservative roots and principles, Stewart insists he is ever willing to come to the table, to compromise.

"I have characterized myself as a radical moderate," he says.

His early reviews are good.

Positive comments are pouring in even from conservative critics of Leavitt administration policies -- from Rep. Cannon to House Speaker Mel Brown and the Utah Association of Counties.

"When I have a rural issue, I give Ted a call," acknowledges Cannon. "He really does understand rural Utah and he has been every place in rural Utah."

Cannon -- who is lined up against Leavitt on the monument lawsuit issue -- admits Stewart is going to be a tough opponent on a veto override.

"It's not hard to identify the people who are on the margins, and Ted will be very influential with those people who aren't firm one way or the other," Cannon says.

The Utah Association of Counties' (UAC) associate director Mark Walsh calls Stewart's appointment "a great move on the part of the governor."

"{Stewart} will bring a dimension to the governor's office that the rural areas are going to be very pleased with," said Walsh, whose organization would have received state aid for its anti-monument lawsuit in the bill that Leavitt vetoed.

"If I were able to work my will, I would override that veto," Walsh says. "Ted's role may be in trying to persuade legislators and others to hold the line."

Speaker Brown would not venture a guess on a veto override, saying a poll of lawmakers was under way.

The first two-term House speaker in more than a decade, Brown has been a leader in the drive to increase the Legislature's power and stature in relation to the executive branch. He often sides with the Rural Caucus against Leavitt initiatives -- such as on issues of open-space conservation and firearms restrictions.

But Brown disputes the notion that Leavitt has a troubled relationship with rural conservatives.

“Heck no. I don't think the governor needs shoring up there,” he insists.

Still, he adds, Stewart is a good person for building bridges to rural Utah.

“His own philosophical leanings align him with the rural and conservative constituencies. There's no question that if that is managed correctly, that relationship will be enhanced,” Brown says.

Even environmentalists praise Stewart's appointment -- albeit faintly.

“The best thing about him is he makes you feel like he's listening to you,” says Lawson LeGate, Sierra Club Southwest regional representative.

“In an area where tempers can flare and feelings run high, someone who is able to take the gentle approach is always to be appreciated,” LeGate says.

“The downside,” adds LeGate, “is having watched and listened to Ted for many years, he is one of the harder core anti-wilderness politicians in the state. He has some very rigid views about those kinds of issues -- wilderness, endangered species protection, wetlands protection.”

Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance issues director Scott Groene is reserving judgment.

“With the steps of vetoing the monument legislation and distancing himself from anti-wilderness legislation in Congress, the governor seems to be taking a path toward a more positive record on the environment,” Groene says. “We would hope Ted's appointment is not inconsistent with this new direction.”