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FOR YOUR INFORMATION
The Spokesman-Review
Spokane, Washington
Sunday June 4, 2017
by Betsy Z. Russell
Page 1 of 3

EYE ON BOISE: Barron chosen to lead Idaho Health

Idaho's largest state agency will get a new director in July.

Gov. Butch Otter has named Russ Barron, currently deputy director of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, to be the next director when longtime head Dick Armstrong retires June 30.

The department has nearly 3,000 employees and a general fund budget of more than a half billion dollars.

Barron has been deputy director since 2014, also overseeing the divisions of welfare and Family and Community Services. Previously, he led the Division of Welfare, served as statewide program manager for the child support program and held a number of administrative roles within that program, starting as a self-reliance specialist in 1998.

Before coming to Idaho, Barron worked for the Missouri Department of Labor's Division of Employment Security and the Texas Department of Human Resources. He holds a master's degree in business administration from Boise State University.

"Russ has a stellar record of achievement and progress throughout his career in state government. Most importantly, he has never lost sight of the properly limited role of government in the lives of all our citizens, including human services recipients," Otter said in a statement. "He has played a central role in helping Health and Welfare run better, leaner and more responsively for the people it serves — as well as taxpayers. I expect him to continue that kind of service to the people of Idaho in this new and expanded role."

Barron said he's honored, and the department's mission is "to promote and protect the health and safety of Idahoans."

"The department has made great strides in delivering meaningful services efficiently and effectively under the direction of Dick Armstrong," Barron said, "and I'm looking forward to working with the department's employees, partners and stakeholders to continue that success."

Barron's salary when he becomes director will be \$155,000, up from his current \$130,000 a year. Armstrong, who has held the position since 2006, makes \$162,000 a year.

Two new parole commissioners

After state lawmakers this year voted to expand the Idaho Commission of Pardons and Parole from five to seven members, Gov. Butch Otter has announced two new appointees: Former state Rep. Rich Wills, R-Glenns Ferry, a longtime state trooper and the former chair of the House Judiciary Committee; and Karen Neill of Pocatello, a forensic nurse and professor of nursing at Idaho State University who also serves on the Idaho Council on Domestic Violence and Victim Assistance.

The increase in the commission's membership comes as its caseload is expanding under the state's Justice Reinvestment Initiative, which focuses on reserving prison cell space for the most dangerous offenders, and moving less-dangerous offenders into community supervision.

The expansion, and the new appointments, will take effect July 1.

'Dozens' turn out for Labrador

The Post Register in Idaho Falls reported Friday that "dozens" turned out for 1st District GOP Rep. Raul Labrador's Idaho Falls campaign stop a day earlier, part of his three-day tour of the state to launch his 2018 campaign for governor. About 80 people attended Labrador's Wednesday announcement in Post Falls; about 85 turned out Tuesday in Boise, about a third of them children. Labrador's Idaho Falls venue was the largest on the tour, the special events center at health products company Melaleuca.

In addition to Labrador, major candidates in the race so far include Lt. Gov. Brad Little, Boise physician and developer Tommy Ahlquist, and former state Sen. Russ Fulcher, all, like Labrador, Republicans.

Crapo urges extension of Secure Rural Schools funding

Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo has sent an op-ed piece to Idaho newspapers urging support for legislation that he and fellow Idaho Sen. Jim Risch, along with a bipartisan group of senators, have introduced to extend the Secure Rural Schools program, which makes payments to rural counties to offset the loss of revenue from timber receipts on federal forests within the counties.

"The SRS program expired in the fall of 2015 and requires congressional reauthorization," Crapo writes. "The lapse in this federal obligation makes many Idaho counties face considerable challenges meeting local needs. Schools, roads, emergency services, forest health projects and other important services are supported through the SRS program. According to the U.S. Forest Service, Idaho counties received in total about \$22 million in SRS payments last year. This year, that number has dropped to \$2 million."

The legislation would extend authorization for SRS payments for two years and add retroactive payments for 2016.

Crapo says he and Risch joined 78 members of Congress from both houses and both parties in a letter urging President Trump to include SRS in his budget proposals, but he didn't.

Little hires campaign manager

Lt. Gov. Brad Little has announced that Zach Hauge will be his campaign manager, starting June 14. Hauge is the vice president of the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, the business lobbying group. He's also worked on numerous Idaho campaigns, including serving as campaign manager for 2nd District GOP Rep. Mike Simpson.

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“Between my current role and previous work, I’ve been involved in over 50 Idaho primary election races,” Hauge said in a statement. “Having worked for Brad Little previously, I couldn’t be more excited to work for a leader who is dedicated to making Idaho the best place to live, work, and raise a family.”

Labrador recently announced that Roger and Gayle Batt will co-chair his campaign. Ahlquist brought on former Idaho GOP Executive Director David Johnston as his campaign manager, with Todd Cranney as senior adviser. Steve Ackerman is Fulcher’s campaign manager. Last week, Little named campaign coordinators in all 44 Idaho counties, including multiple people in a dozen of the counties.

“Zach will make a great addition to the team, and his experience in campaigns and his work in the Republican Party make him an invaluable asset,” Little said in a statement. “It’s the conservatives from Rexburg to Payette, and from Payette to Bonners Ferry that are going to lead us to victory, and no one understands that better than Zach.”

Ahlquist tabs Watkins

GOP gubernatorial hopeful Dr. Tommy Ahlquist on Friday named Damond Watkins as his campaign chairman. Watkins, of Idaho Falls, is Idaho’s national committeeman for the Republican Party. Watkins said he generally doesn’t endorse in primary races, but in the 2018 race for Idaho governor — which already has drawn four major GOP candidates — he decided to take that step.

“I have a longstanding tradition of always supporting the victor coming out of our primaries,” Watkins said in a statement. “I am convinced, however, that the best candidate our party can offer up to the general election voters is Tommy Ahlquist.”

Eaton shifts from Realtors

John Eaton, government affairs director for the Idaho Association of Realtors, has been named vice president of the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry; he’ll replace Zach Hauge, who will start June 14 as campaign manager for Little’s 2018 gubernatorial campaign.

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