

When duty calls

Business owners setting aside their commercial interests for a few years to help shape public policy



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As a business community, we often pay close attention to politics – but also often complain – because we rarely get involved by running for elected office. Particularly in the case of fulltime legislative positions, where such a call to action demands time and attention that would otherwise go toward making our businesses successful.

In a day and time where career politicians are under scrutiny for a lifetime career of policy making, it's been refreshing to see leaders from the business community step forward, place their business operations in hands of others for a spell, and – in the words of a few local business leaders – do their duty for state and country.

On the national forum, well known names like former Hewlett Packard CEO Carly Fiorina won the Republican primary for a U.S. Senate seat in California to challenge three-term incumbent Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), while former eBay CEO Meg Whitman won the GOP primary in California's race for governor.

Closer to home – but still on the national stage – Oshkosh resident Ron Johnson, president and owner of Pacur Inc., won the Republican endorsement for the U.S. Senate seat held by three-term incumbent Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wis.), who is seeking a fourth six-year term.

Early last month, Kimberly-based Hanson Benefits owner Chris Hanson announced her candidacy for the 57th District state assembly seat currently held by Penny Bernard Schaber (D-Appleton). She'll face two other candidates in the Republican primary Sept. 10 for the right to challenge Bernard Schaber in November.

Dr. Steve Kagen, the region's well-known allergist, set aside his successful practice to enter the U.S. House of Representatives after first being elected in 2006. Four years later, the representative to Wisconsin's 8th Congressional District is seeking his third two-year term, still indicating he's not a career politician, but noting the job he set out to do in Washington still remains incomplete.

Two years ago, Randy Hopper, the owner of Fond du Lac's largest media outlet in Mountain Dog Media, placed his business in the hands of his executive leadership to assume office in the state Senate as the representative for the Fond du Lac and

Oshkosh areas. He's serving his first four-year term in Wisconsin's Senate.

In each case, the candidates have made pledges to head to Madison or Washington, make necessary changes, and get back to the job of running their business.

The recent financial crisis and issues with the federal government's response to it are the factors driving Johnson's candidacy for Senate. He spent the last 30 years building plastic medical packaging manufacturer Pacur Inc. in Oshkosh, and he's concerned the current governing body is headed down a path of recklessness for other hard working Americans.

"I'm going there because of the huge financial mess that we're in," Johnson told me in mid-June. Now Johnson didn't specifically indicate that he was going to limit himself to one six-year term or two terms. But he said he plans to speak his mind and stand up for his constituents, no matter what political consequences ultimately might result.

"Even if that means getting booted back to Oshkosh in six years," Johnson said.

Running for public office while setting aside her health insurance benefits agency was a difficult decision for Chris Hanson at a time when so many employers are placing a more educated focus on their group health insurance plans. With the utmost confidence in her staff to carry on her business and a dire concern for what she described as "out-of-control spending and an out-of-control budget" in Madison, Hanson plans to stay in office long enough to tutor state officials to be fiscally responsible.

"If I ran my own business this way, I wouldn't have one," Hanson said during a recent conversation in mid-June.

And that speaks to a point of a certain sensibility needed to manage government effectively. I'm not saying our state and federal legislatures should be made up entirely of all business leaders. And I'm not – at least, yet – making a case against so-called career politicians.

But when sound business oversight and fiscal discipline become buried underneath the disorderly scuttle of politicians wrangling to keep their jobs, maybe the wisdom of a few successful business leaders can help get the ship back on course.

