I Have Been Nominated to a Second Term

It is hard to believe that it has been just over five years since Governor Sununu first nominated me to be the 7th Commissioner of Agriculture. I started out drinking from a fire hose, with most of it coming out of my ears, for the first six months or so. No amount of reading statutes can really give a person a firm understanding of what this “little” department does. It always seems to amaze people when they find out how many areas of their lives we touch. It may be worth writing about that in the future, but for now I will just say that it’s likely you don’t go a week without purchasing a product that this department is involved with in some way.

When I became Commissioner I didn’t know anyone here, with the exception of my sister, who didn’t work here, but as the Executive Director of the FFA, has a work station in the office. I did know Commissioners Merrill and Taylor and, as the former Speaker of the House, I also knew many Commissioners from other agencies, so I knew that I would have friends I could turn to for advice. I immediately found that I had “inherited” a department full of welcoming co-workers who were knowledgeable, committed to the mission of the department and ready to teach me.

I soon learned that we had 38 full-time authorized positions, but that six of those positions were vacant and unadvertised. We also had two part-time positions that were needed, but also unfilled. Today we have 40 full-time positions, with three of them recently becoming vacant and all are advertised. We also have three filled part-time positions. We also have a full-time in-house IT person, although that person works for the Department of Information Technology.

Along with trying to fill positions, I took on the task of receiving legislative approval to move the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) to this department from the Department of Health and Human Services. At first I am not sure most people understood why I felt so strongly about the move (it was not about empire building). Today I doubt there is anyone who falls under the jurisdiction of the program that doesn’t appreciate it being a Department of Agriculture responsibility.

It wasn’t long before the pandemic hit and all plans came to a screeching halt and we had to pivot to developing a plan to help farms survive COVID-19. With the help of UNH Cooperative Extension we put together a request which, through two programs, provided 7.5 million dollars of federal aid to our farms.

We have also applied for and received a grant to provide over $550,000 for a program, run by Cooperative Extension, to help farmers who are facing any number of stress factors in their lives. In cooperation with the NH Food Bank we have received another $900,000 to bring NH produce to local food pantries, this program will run for the next two years. We are also seeking final approval for just over $1,000,000 to develop a certificate meat processing program, which can be taken on the road around the state, and to provide grants to slaughterhouses to expand or improve their facilities. The course is being developed by UNH Cooperative Extension.
All of the funding is being provided through Federal grants. While I am not personally a fan of all of this government spending, since the money has been made available I want to make sure that our NH farms benefit from it.

It has been an interesting and productive five years and I am grateful to Governor Sununu for nominating me to a second term. I will be contacting the members of the Executive Council in the coming days to ask them for their support. I feel confident that the work that we have done at the department will lead to a positive vote by the Council. That vote is scheduled to take place on November 22.

Shawn N. Jasper-Commissioner