

Leavitt's top aide jumps ship

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Gov. Mike Leavitt's top aide has jumped ship, the second senior Cabinet official to resign in as many months.

Chief of Staff Charlie Johnson's resignation was announced Monday at a press conference attended by Leavitt, Johnson and other members of Leavitt's staff. "There are times in your life you find you're the most marketable member in your family unit," Johnson said. "This is a time for me to improve my net worth."

Johnson has accepted a position with Garff-Warner as vice chairman of the board of directors. He will assist in the completion of the merger between the two auto dealership giants, as well as other acquisitions and helping the company go public. His emphasis will be strategic planning.

Johnson, who had retired from the private sector before joining the Leavitt administration, has been with Leavitt since 1993 when Leavitt first took office. He indicated at that time his tenure in public service would not be permanent, fueling speculation for the past couple of years that he would leave.

Although he believes stability is important to the governor's Cabinet, Johnson said a new member may also prove beneficial. "There is some value in some turnover," he said.

Leavitt also praised Johnson for his work during the past four years. "He helped me make this important transition (to the governorship)," Leavitt said. He said the history of his administration would not be complete without taking his work into account.

Leavitt will announce Johnson's replacement at a later date. One of the most persistent rumors the past couple of years on Capitol Hill has been that Leavitt will replace Johnson with Rod Betit, executive director of both the Department of Human Services and the Department of Health.

Betit is generally considered the kind of manager you bring in when there are serious problems that need to be fixed - the kind who is not afraid to turn programs and staffs upside down and fire people when needed. His weakness is seen as his lack of people skills and a less-than-cordial working relationship with the Legislature.

Another possible replacement is former Speaker of the House Nolan Karras, who is rumored to have ambitions to be governor himself after Leavitt retires. Karras serves on the Salt Lake Olympic Organizing Committee where he represents state interests. He has also been Leavitt's point man on the state Building Board, which sets the politically difficult priorities as to which government and university buildings are constructed.

The gregarious Karras has paid his dues and may be seeking a position more in the public spotlight, but his weakness may be his strength: He is politically ambitious and outspoken.

Another possibility might be Bangerter's former Chief of Staff Bud Scruggs, who is currently an executive for industrialist Ian Cummings. Scruggs and Leavitt are close personal friends, and Scruggs' management abilities in the public and private sector are well-respected.

Scruggs has experience managing political campaigns, and he might be a good person for Leavitt to have on board should Leavitt seek a U.S. Senate seat in four years (if Sen.

Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, retires).

A fourth possibility is Mike Christensen, executive director of the Utah Foundation and Bangerter's former deputy for planning. Given Leavitt's priorities concerning long-range economic development and planning, Christensen, an economist, is well-suited to address those needs.

Leavitt's chief of policy, LaVarr Webb, resigned last month to assume the position as assistant to the editor at the Deseret News.