

## **LEAVITT PICKS DEMO AS CHIEF OF STAFF APPOINTMENT SURPRISES MANY, EVEN MCKEOWN**

Lucinda Dillon

**The Deseret News.** Salt Lake City, Utah: October 6, 1999

*Copyright The Deseret News October 6, 1999*

Gov. Mike Leavitt has picked a former educator, attorney, tax man and a Democrat to be his next chief of staff after the long-anticipated appointment Tuesday of current chief Ted Stewart to a federal judgeship.

Rich McKeown, 52, has been on the Utah State Tax Commission since 1996 and chairman of the board that supervises Utah's tax system since 1998. Before that, he was a partner with Parker, McKeown and McConkie for nearly 20 years. "Rich McKeown has broad experience in the public and private sector that has earned him community-wide respect," Leavitt said Wednesday. "He brings problem-solving skills, leadership and knowledge that will help carry my administration into the next century."

"People really like him," added Vicki Varela, the governor's spokeswoman. McKeown also has the confidence of the Utah State Legislature and many players in the public sector, she said.

Because Stewart's appointment as a federal judge had been under scrutiny for several weeks, Varela said, the governor had adequate time to pick the best person. Talks with McKeown started a few weeks ago, but the governor called McKeown late Tuesday to offer the job.

"This is probably best characterized as a surprise," McKeown said. "I was very happy at the Tax Commission, as sick as that sounds."

McKeown may be best known for his run for mayor in 1995, when he barely lost the race to Deedee Corradini. At that time, he said publicly that he is a Democrat, although the position is not partisan. He also has filled a Democratic seat on the Tax Commission board, which is balanced equally between the political parties.

McKeown said he is "ideologically and philosophically" in line with the governor and he will work to support the governor's efforts for a world-class education in Utah, quality jobs, quality growth and "meeting the needs of those who are truly needy."

McKeown's political affiliation was discussed as he was considered for the job, Varela said. "Certainly he's had association with the Democratic Party and that was acknowledged, but it hasn't been a key factor because he does bring an ideological approach that is very compatible with the governor," Varela said.

GOP Rep. Merrill Cook took criticism from GOP loyalists when earlier this year he hired Shari Holweg, a known Democrat, to work on his staff. Will Leavitt get similar complaints?

"Obviously we'd prefer (the new chief of staff) was a Republican," said Scott Simpson, executive director of the state Republican Party, adding it would seem Leavitt could have found a Republican to fit that bill. "But the governor has picked fine people to head his staff before. We'll just have to see how the state delegates and state Central Committee reacts to this (appointment)."

House Majority Leader Kevin Garn, R-Layton, said he knows McKeown well. "He's a good man and conservative in his politics."

A GOP pick would have facilitated the relationship between the GOP-controlled Legislature and executive branches of government better, according to Garn, and there's some concern about McKeown's affiliation. "But I think Rich can build those confidences to serve the governor well," he said.

Meg Holbrook, state Democratic Party chairwoman, said upon hearing of the appointment: "I'm floored. I don't know what to say. Well, Rich is a moderate Democrat. I congratulate Gov. Leavitt on this fine appointment. Rich is a terrific negotiator. The governor had done the right thing."

McKeown attended Ohio University, then got his law degree from the University of Utah after moving to Salt Lake City in 1972 with his wife, Barbara, who is a Utah native.

McKeown was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up in the East. He taught middle-school grades in Virginia before moving to Utah.