

GOLDEN: For Murphy, filling posts means saying 'no' more than 'yes'

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(Photo: AP)

The good news for Gov.-elect Phil Murphy is that in January he'll be able to fill upwards of 3,000 positions in state government, either by the nomination/Senate confirmation process or by direct appointment.

The bad news is that he'll likely receive 10,000 job applications.

Assembling a new administration in a relatively compressed time frame — 10 weeks between election and inauguration — is challenging and is made even more so by the pressure from political leaders and private interest groups seeking to place friendly faces in positions of influence.

Despite what appears to be a political jackpot — thousands of jobs with varying levels of prestige and compensation to be distributed while earning the undying gratitude of those chosen — Murphy will be forced to say no more often than he says yes.

His transition office will be inundated with resumes, accompanied by glowing letters of recommendation from political figures, business associates, friends, clergy and junior high school football coaches, all attesting to the integrity, intellect and work ethic of the applicant.

In the two transition offices in which I served — Tom Kean in 1981 and Christie Whitman in 1993 — the running joke was that the postal carrier risked a hernia lugging bags of mail from the elevator along the corridor to the office.

While cabinet officers are more prestigious with higher public recognition, they can also be among the most difficult to fill.

Recruiting highly successful men and women from the private sector — corporate, legal, academic — by promising them a salary reduction and an opportunity to serve in what can sometimes be a controversial and thankless job tests the persuasive powers of any governor.

Most of the individuals sought after are at the peak of their earnings power in their professions and, in addition to higher salaries, enjoy benefits equal to or superior to those in government.

At \$141,000 a year, cabinet salaries are non-competitive with those in the upper reaches of management in the business world, for instance, and is more comparable to that of middle management.

Convincing experienced, highly motivated individuals to bring their expertise into state government for less money is challenging.

Despite the obvious obstacles, Murphy will likely have a full complement of cabinet nominees in time to submit to the Senate for confirmation in the days immediately following his inauguration.

Some will accept his job offer out of a sense of public service, others for the chance to bring their administrative and managerial experience to bear on issues that affect the lives of millions of their fellow citizens.

The so called sub-cabinet posts — deputy and assistant commissioners, divisions directors, and the like — will be chosen by the cabinet officer with clearance from the governor's office.

The political pressures surrounding this process cannot be overstated. County chairs and elected officers at the county or municipal level all weigh in on behalf of job seekers, reminding the governor and his top staff of their unwavering support during the campaign and suggesting it is now time for such support to be recognized.

Murphy must move delicately in navigating through the pressures, mindful that each affirmative response means several negative ones. With Democrats out of power for the last eight years, the desire to stock government with party loyalists is intense, indeed.

With the authority of direct appointment to dozens of boards and commissions — some paid, others not — as well as entities such as county boards of election and tax boards, Murphy can ease much of the political pressures by offering such positions to his campaign supporters.

Judges at every level, other than municipal, and county prosecutors are selected by the governor as well and, while politics often plays a role, the required legal background narrows the pool of potential nominees.

While the selection of cabinet officers takes priority, the appointment of the governor's top staff, those closest to him and in whom he places the utmost trust and confidence — chief of staff, chief counsel, director of policy and planning — is crucial as well.

It is these individuals who interact with legislators, prominent private-sector figures and political leaders in the day-to-day business of government.

Murphy's selections will be watched closely by the political tea leaf readers for signs of his legislative agenda and style of governance.

They will also offer clues to his political instincts — a quality of equal importance.

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