

Cascade County Commissioner Peggy Beltrone: Leaving a lasting legacy

By Karl Puckett | 09/07/10

Longtime Cascade County Commissioner Peggy Beltrone is exchanging public service for the private sector, but she'll still be chasing wind development in Cascade County.

In June, Beltrone, one of the region's best-known public officials, announced she was resigning 28 months shy of completing her third term to become president of Exergy Integrated Systems, a subsidiary of Idaho-based wind developer Exergy. Friday was her last day after 15 1/2 years in office.

Beltrone, 53, was the first woman elected to the Cascade County commission. She stood out in other ways, making frequent trips out of state a regular part of the job and putting issues of poverty, public and mental health, juvenile delinquency and the environment front and center over three terms.

But close observers of commission business say she left her biggest mark on the county through relentless efforts to get residents to appreciate the region's abundant wind resource.

"Her biggest accomplishment was helping the community to recognize the potential for wind energy, and all of her hard work trying to make that happen," said state Rep. Sue Dickenson of Great Falls.

Soon after Barack Obama won the presidential election in 2008, Beltrone interviewed for a job as assistant secretary of the Office of Electricity in the U.S. Department of Energy, which is leading government efforts to upgrade transmission.

She didn't get the job but her application, which indicated a willingness to step down from county office, led to an offer from Exergy, and she took it, she said.

"I'm not closing any doors," Beltrone said of her future in politics. "But right now, I'm

going to have my hands full working for Exergy."

At Exergy, Beltrone will have an office at the Johnson Hotel and lead a technology division developing "vertical axis wind technology" to make turbines more efficient. The company hopes to manufacture the turbines in Great Falls.

In 1979, Beltrone - then Peggy Shields - graduated from Gonzaga University and came to Great Falls in 1980 to work as a KRTV news reporter and anchor, covering Cascade County government.

She left the news business in 1985 to open a business, Beltrone Communications.

In 1994, Beltrone, well-recognized because of her years on television, won a three-person race in the Democratic primary for the District 3 seat, upsetting the incumbent and easily beating the Republican candidate in the general election.

Working women in county government were pleased.

"Oh thank God you were elected," they told Beltrone at the time. "Our bathrooms will be clean."

Beltrone laughed recalling the reaction to her historic victory.

She had the last laugh at the polls in 2000 and 2006, when she cruised to re-election. Even at her final meeting Thursday, Beltrone was able to ensure that Jane Weber, the candidate she supported, was appointed to her old seat.

"Obviously, she is a very formidable candidate," said state Rep. Brian Hoven, R-Great Falls, who is past president of the Cascade County Republican Party. "She's won handily. She's a sharp lady. There's no getting around it."

A persistent criticism throughout her career was that Beltrone traveled out of state too much addressing issues she took on as a commissioner, whether it be methamphetamine abuse, childhood obesity prevention or wind energy in later years.

In 2008 and 2009, for example, she gave presentations at wind conferences in Kansas, Washington, D.C., Helena, Albany, N.Y., Texas and Oregon. She was a keynote speaker

at the Missouri Association of Counties 2006 Annual Conference on the Montana Meth Project. Earlier this year, she participated in a White House listening session on childhood obesity prevention.

Those trips forced her to miss more commission meetings than her colleagues and critics questioned what good they did for Cascade County. Hoven said most of the grumbling he heard among Republicans centered on Beltrone's participation, or lack thereof, in commission meetings.

"It was good for the county, and good for everybody, she resigned because of her attendance," Hoven said.

As of Aug. 24, Beltrone had been absent from six of the commission's 16 regular meetings. Fellow commissioners Joe Briggs and Bill Salina had not missed a meeting in that time frame. In 2009, Beltrone missed seven of the commission's regular 25 meetings. Salina was absent once; Briggs was present at all the meetings.

By her own accounting, Beltrone visited 26 states in her 2 1/2 terms in office. She said the county never paid for any of her travel and that she only took trips if somebody else paid the way.

"I've tried to be a voice for rural issues at national meetings," she said.

Beltrone's interest early on in office wasn't wind but helping children, with a focus on juvenile delinquency and teen pregnancy. It was no accident.

"I was the first woman elected, but I was also the first mother with children elected," Beltrone said.

Her work in areas of poverty and public health were notable during her tenure, Dickenson said. Beltrone, she added, also was instrumental in pushing for energy conservation measures on county buildings that serve as a model for other governments.

"I think she brought a woman's perspective to things, which isn't necessarily better than a man's, but it's different," Dickenson said.

Promoting wind development, which came later, fit naturally with Beltrone's interest in bringing economic development to rural areas, especially those with higher poverty rates, she said. She saw her first wind turbine on a trip to Pincher Creek, Alberta, with Randy Gray, then the mayor of Great Falls.

"I think that highlighted my realization wind energy could be a tremendous boost for the region," she said.

Wind energy, she adds, will leave a cleaner legacy than the mining and refining industries of the past century.

She developed a marketing plan to advertise the county's wind and supported an effort by the county to produce maps showing wind potential and land ownership.

A website devoted to wind energy, and a small wind turbine at the county's new public works facility off of busy Interstate 15, were largely her doings as well.

"I think we sent an early signal we were a wind-friendly community," Beltrone said.

In 2006, the county's first wind farm, the 9-megawatt Horseshoe Bend facility, was constructed by Exergy at the United Materials property just outside of Great Falls. That's been the only commercial development to date, but Beltrone says the groundwork has been laid.

"We could have 1,000 megawatts of wind in Cascade County," she said.

Former Republican Commissioner Lance Olson, who served with Beltrone for six years, says Beltrone will be remembered for her work in promoting the wind industry as well as public health issues - and her decisiveness. "She made decisions and stood by them."

"It was a slow process, but I think we developed a great professional working relationship," Olson said. "At the same time, I think we developed a personal relationship based on respect."

Commissioner Bill Salina, a Democrat on the current commission, called Beltrone a "formidable politician" with valuable institutional knowledge of county business that will

be missed.

"Not only do I think she was a good commissioner, I think the people of Cascade County thought she was a good commissioner," Salina said.

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