

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL
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NEW GOVERNORS MUST HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Our state Constitution provides that officials elected in November take office on the first Monday of the following January. That gives them eight weeks to prepare for their new duties. Two months may seem like a long time to get ready for most jobs, but if you are a Governor-elect that time will go by all too quickly.

During this eight week period, the Governor-elect must do the following:

- Pick a personal staff of top assistants who will help him to manage the Executive Office and maintain relations with the Legislature, the press and the agency heads
- Select a Cabinet secretary for almost every state agency
- Select deputy secretaries and executive assistants for those same agencies
- Select dozens of division administrators to help run the larger agencies
- Prepare an inaugural address to be delivered on January 3rd
- Deal with the personal impact of moving his family to Madison
- Prepare a “state of the State” address for delivery to a joint session of the Legislature sometime during his first month in office
- Begin work on the state budget that he must by law present to the Legislature by February 1. (The Legislature will likely cut the new Governor some slack on this one by granting a two week extension if he requests one—and most new Governors do.)

The pace during this transition period is often intense. Indeed, one Governor-elect, Orland Loomis, died during his transition after winning the 1942 election.

And the stakes are high. The decisions made in these two months will give most people their first impression of the new Governor’s capabilities. Politicians know that most voters place great stock in first impressions. Getting off to a good start is critical to a successful term of office.

Moreover, the Governor’s personnel decisions for his staff, Cabinet, and agency leadership will do much to determine how effective he will be during his first couple of years in office. No one person is irreplaceable, and governors have often found it necessary to reshuffle their staffs or replace Cabinet secretaries who prove not to be a good fit for their agencies. Such changes, however, can be disruptive and deflect precious time from what even in the best of circumstances is an immensely challenging job.

One must also remember that this “task list,” imposing as it is, reflects business as usual. It does not account for the unexpected, such as worse than anticipated fiscal estimates that may require a Governor to revise the existing budget. Nor does it anticipate a crisis of other kinds be it a panic in the financial sector, a natural disaster, or some other problem that can’t wait for a new Governor to get comfortable.

One may say that the people who run for governor know what they are getting into and don’t deserve much sympathy. But most governors acknowledge that nothing in their earlier experience quite prepares them for the realities of being the chief executive of an entire state.

We demand a lot of our Governors. And we should pray for our Governor-elect, whether we voted for him or not, as he readies himself for the challenges that await him.

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