

An interview with Janet Waldron: Reforming Maine state government

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This past year Janet Waldron was appointed commissioner of the Department of Administrative and Financial Services for the State of Maine, planting her firmly in the center of a number of recent Maine state government reform initiatives. Waldron discusses some of these current initiatives and in the process, offers a vision of a more streamlined, responsive, and accountable government. Prior to Waldron's appointment as commissioner, she served for six years as assistant secretary of state where she was instrumental in reengineering the Corporate Capital Fee Division. She has also worked for the Department of Conservation, Central Maine Power Company, and as a senior legislative analyst for the Legislative Office of Fiscal and Program Review. Commissioner Waldron chairs the Maine Telecommunications and Information Technology Planning Project, is a member of the Information Services Policy Board, an executive committee member of the Rural Economic Development Council, and participated on the Infrastructure subcommittee of the Economic Growth Council. She holds a B.A. degree from the University of New Hampshire, attended graduate school at Dartmouth College, and is an alumna of the Leadership Maine Program.

MPR: Survey data consistently indicates that many citizens hold negative perceptions about what government does for them. A majority of taxpayers just do not feel like they are getting a good return on their public investment. What are your thoughts on this?

Waldron: When working at the Secretary of State's office, I certainly became aware of the literature and public sentiments that underscore the issues of public distrust. I believe that if you keep your commitments to the public and you do things in the most direct and least expensive way, then these actions will speak for themselves and will eventually restore public trust.

It comes down to the old-fashioned idea of accountability. There is a misguided way of approaching accountability, which is why we take a piece of paper through ten signatures to insure accountability. This is not right. Accountability really has to do with outcomes, with results. Governor King and the legislature have initiated performance budgeting. This will allocate resources based on achievement of measurable outcomes instead of the current line-item budgeting process. The end result will be that the taxpayer will know what is being bought and at what price. Agencies will be held to results, accomplishments, and actual service delivery. We intend to have some aspects of this in place for the next biennial budget.

Tied to the delivery of outcomes is good customer service. How do we in government treat the public when they come in contact with our agency? Historically the public has been sent from one place to another. The customer service question is: Can you go to one place and be treated courteously and get the information you need? The phrase "one stop shopping" has been coined as a descriptor. Through the consolidation of information, programs, and service delivery, the

public will increasingly receive improved service. Joint initiatives between the Department of Labor, the Department of Fisheries & Wildlife, the Department of Human Services, and the Bureau of Motor Vehicles in the form of information kiosks are an example of success in this area. In taxation, we turned taxpayers' income tax refunds around, on average, in 14 days. Government can change and we are making it happen.

MPR: You mean state government is becoming more consumer-oriented?

Waldron: Yes. There are a number of initiatives across state and local agencies which are working to improve access to service. Part of the reason why I have gotten so excited about telecommunications has to do with these issues of customer service and accountability. So much of what has been happening in this arena has to do with multiple players, many of whom have never worked together before, planning collaboratively and communicating in different ways. A cultural revolution is taking place. Telecommunications is not just about voice and data or video; we are really talking about the way we deliver services and the relationship between service delivery and accessibility of quality information. It is an expansion and reconfiguration of the world we know.

MPR: In Maine today a level of distrust exists between Maine state employees and the leadership in government. What are your thoughts on the employee morale in state government?

Waldron: I am certainly aware of this issue; morale has been low for a long time and it will take time to resolve. Direct communications are important and there are a number of opportunities to pursue. While people may not agree with all the answers, they deserve and expect direct, clear communications. As government downsizes this becomes increasingly essential.

We have to pay attention to the employee morale issue because we do not want to lose our best people and we want to offer them opportunities. We need to invest more in our employees through training and by giving them the proper tools. I expect the downsized workforce will be more diverse, requiring individuals to have a broader range of skills and to perform multiple functions. These are the same concepts we are seeing in the private sector.

MPR: You have identified some ways that state government needs to change. From your perspective what are the key areas of change that Maine's state government faces today?

Waldron: The Governor's vision is for change in four key areas: a smaller, more responsive workforce; increased economic development where government is a supportive catalyst to growth; continued regulatory reform; and fiscal integrity.

MPR: How do we get there? What are the next steps?

Waldron: The Productivity Realization Task Force is one vehicle for getting us there. The task force is focused on reviewing government services, and finding more efficient ways of delivering them.

This task force also links the entire cabinet together. We all have responsibilities for different departments and what we have tried to do is step back and take a look at our programs and services to see how they meet today's needs. Do they? What is really exciting is the strength behind our commitment to work together. We have a team that is crossing departmental boundaries with new ideas and visions.

Also, as I stated earlier, the state is shifting towards a performance-based budgeting process. This will require strong strategic planning.

MPR: Performance-based budgeting is not a new concept. We can go back thirty years and see performance-based budgeting. Evaluations of those efforts show that they did not really help much. Is there anything new and different this time around?

Waldron: What has changed is there is a sincere commitment to make it successful. I don't think it will be easy and we are not fooling ourselves. But there is an incredible drive to do it and to show that we are accountable. It is an exciting opportunity.

MPR: You mean focusing on the delivery of outcomes.

Waldron: Exactly. The difference now is our effort to look at the whole picture rather than just the government picture. Performance-based budgeting within this larger context provides opportunities for increasing partnerships--horizontal integration--especially between the public and private sectors. If you can identify what part of the whole you've got, then collectively you can stimulate more collaboration, and leverage existing resources.

The exchange of electronic information lends itself to this as well. You can communicate the intended results and then you can identify who is doing what part. Someone in Madawaska can pull information up on a computer screen and say, "Wait a second. I have a company here that can provide a piece of that service. I can become a part of that effort."

Conceptually, performance-based budgeting is very similar to the seamless nature of telecommunications. Both will make a difference in terms of service delivery and outcomes. Ultimately, people want one point of contact. They don't care, or need to know, what is in between.

In many ways the performance-based budgeting process, the productivity task force, and the telecommunications arena are all tools which are helping to reinvent state government. Part of this whole process involves looking for opportunities that represent horizontal integrations rather than the creation of vertical entities. This is really the current mode of state government. The political environment today is not about creating new entities, but is about creating synergy. We have all the components and we are bringing the pieces together without creating new corporate structures. The result is something that is more dynamic and fluid in terms of meeting the needs of the time and situation. Performance budgeting refocuses the discussion on policy, priorities, and outcomes.

MPR: Total Quality Management (TQM) was initiated in the last administration. Where is that going today? Does it fit in?

Waldron: Yes. Very much so. Pushing decisions down to the lowest levels in the organization requires training and process change. TQM is about teaming, empowering workers, and changing business based on sound analysis. Quality management is not a fad, it is a way of doing business that reflects a cultural change. Part of the dynamic is finding the balance between process and product.

MPR: Can you provide an example of how you've struck that balance?

Waldron: One of the issues that is of great concern to me has to do with restoring the state's fiscal integrity. A Process Action Team, brought together by the prior administration, looked at the state's general cash fund and working capital. The team identified several concerns and put forth recommendations which I am working to implement. This effort served as an important beginning. In this past legislative session, Governor King was active in strengthening the state's fiscal condition through the reversal of a number of "gimmicks." We intend to aggressively work with the legislature to put the state's fiscal house in order. I plan to continue moving this effort forward through the use of Quality Management trends.

MPR: You have mentioned telecommunications a number of times. What is the vision here and what is the state's role in achieving this vision?

Waldron: The vision is articulated through the Maine Telecommunications Information and Technology Planning Project, which I chair. (Mike Angelakis from State Cable Television serves as the vice-chair.) It says that we are "...to have in place an advanced, integrated public and private telecommunications system that is affordable, easy to use, and accessible everywhere in Maine, and used widely by individuals and by organizations of every kind in their own homes, schools, and offices."

In achieving that vision, I see the state as a facilitator, the deliverer of government services, and certainly ensuring healthy competition and accessibility through our regulatory responsibilities. I do not see the state as an owner of a statewide network. I think we can help to insure the fundamental principles like equity and access. We do not want to create a telecommunications system that results in "haves" and "have-nots."

MPR: You have raised an issue which many people are concerned about. Ultimately, telecommunications is about people and their use of it. Do they have the skills? Is it geographically accessible? Is it affordable? What is the state's role here?

Waldron: I think it goes without saying that we have a lot to do in this arena. Presently, there are three major statewide initiatives underway. First, the recent Public Utilities Commission Order directed NYNEX to afford Maine's schools and libraries up to \$4 million annually in reduced rates, additional services, and equipment for the next five years. NYNEX is adding another million for a total investment of \$28 million. Second, the state will be working with a vendor to install a statewide asynchronous transfer mode (ATM) telecommunications backbone

to every high school. Third, we have two bond issues, one for \$15 million and another for \$5 million, to purchase equipment for schools and libraries. While each piece stands alone, they are essential pieces to the whole and will result in an incredible economic development tool for the public and private sectors.

We are at a very exciting time. Across the state private and public sector organizations are working on community networks. Many creative and entrepreneurial activities are underway. The Science and Technology Center, the Education Network of Maine, the Margaret Chase Smith Library Center, and the Maine Development Foundation are all working to strengthen the educational component and the use of technology for business solutions. A strong training program is incorporated in the K-12 and library proposal to the Public Utilities Commission. State government is also gearing up to meet these needs. When we consider all of the possibilities, Maine can have a statewide telecommunications infrastructure that reaches every community in the near future. This would release incredible potential. It's exciting. There will be opportunities for everyone and it will stimulate economic activity, making Maine competitive.

MPR: There is a new administration and a new climate in Augusta. As commissioner of Administrative and Financial Services, you are intimately involved. How have you found this level of public sector leadership?

Waldron: First let me say that I've been in the public policy arena for a long time and I love it. It offers many opportunities for breadth of thinking, for action, for making a difference. State government in particular needs to be on the cutting edge of policy. For the business community, if our laws, rules, and regulations are not of the highest quality then we will stifle creativity. It's dynamic in this way.

I really wanted to be a part of this administration because Maine government is at a point where it has to change. Governor King has a deep commitment to this change. This is not to say that there have not been changes over time in the way things are done; but this is it. We really have to do it. I do not enjoy how downsizing can negatively affect state employees and their families; these are the human elements that no one ever enjoys. These are the hard and difficult struggles that we must deal with as we lead Maine into the future.

I've really enjoyed my new position in that it's an opportunity to help shape change--to be at the center of something that is really very exciting. I am also excited to work with my colleagues in the cabinet. I have the greatest admiration for this group of people. My greatest frustration so far is never having enough time to do everything I want to do and learn everything I want to learn.

Janet E. Waldron was appointed commissioner of the Department of Administrative & Financial Services for the State of Maine by Governor King. In her prior position, she served as assistant secretary of state.

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