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Perdue chooses her transportation team

By Mark Johnson

McClatchy Newspapers

Posted: Tuesday, Jan. 06, 2009

Slideshow



Eugene Conti, Transportation Secretary

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- [Perdue names Crisco to head Commerce](#)
- [Businesswoman picked to lead cultural arts](#)
- [Gene Conti](#)

Age: 62

Education: B.A. Sociology/Anthropology, Eastern Michigan University, 1971; M.A. Policy Sciences and Public Affairs, Duke University, 1978; Ph. D. Anthropology, Duke University, 1978

Experience: N.C. Chief Deputy Secretary of Transportation 2001-2003, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Transportation 1998-2001, Maryland Secretary of Labor 1995-1998

Connection To Perdue: Wife, Betsy, served for three years as Perdue's chief of staff in the lieutenant governor's office

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N.C. Gov.-elect Bev Perdue emphasized the pedigrees of her top transportation picks, introducing four other senior department officials with long track records on the agency's professional staff:

James Trogdon, also a general in the N.C. National Guard, as chief operating officer.

Anthony Roper as deputy secretary for administration and business development.

Susan Coward as deputy secretary for intergovernmental affairs.

Terry Gibson as director of the state highway administration.

RALEIGH With North Carolina's need for roads expanding – and money to build them dwindling – Gov.-elect Bev Perdue on Monday named a veteran administrator to overhaul the state's transportation system.

Perdue said she intends to do what would be considered a daunting task even in good economic times: to take politics out of road-building.

"I want to professionalize the Department of Transportation," Perdue said during a news conference to announce her appointment of Gene Conti, a veteran of the state and U.S. departments of transportation, as new head of the state agency. Perdue also named four other top transportation department officials, all promoted from within the state agency instead of outside political appointments.

Perdue underscored her campaign pledge to strip the politically appointed Board of Transportation of its power to make road-building decisions. The board has drawn criticism about political patronage for years.

"Transportation decisions will be based on data," Perdue said, "and they will be driven in this administration by professionals."

Perdue also announced Monday her appointments to head the state departments of Commerce and Cultural Resources. She is expected to announce more members of her Cabinet today.

The transportation pick was a closely watched appointment. Observers were curious whether Perdue, a Democrat with a long resume in state politics, would rebuff pressure from campaign fundraisers backing others for the N.C. DOT post. They wondered whether she would demonstrate independence from Senate President Pro Tem Marc Basnight, a fellow Democrat who publicly endorsed current DOT board member Lanny Wilson of Wilmington for the top transportation job.

Conti contributed more than \$2,000 to Perdue's campaign, but his distance from the fundraising machinery was applauded by one watchdog group that pushed recent ethics reforms in the legislature.

"If there are people being put in top positions that are not top fundraisers or top givers, that is a sign of progress" said Bob Phillips, executive director of Common Cause North Carolina.

But removing politics from road building will not be easy.

State Sen. Clark Jenkins, who chairs the Senate transportation budget committee, cautioned that Perdue can't extract the N.C. Board of Transportation's power without getting the legislature to change state law. Most board members are appointed to represent designated regions of the state.

"I would be very slow to realign the board to where you take out the local area flavor in the decision-making," Jenkins said. "What the mountain folks need is different from the metropolitan folks need and the coast needs something else."

Conti, 62, grew up in Pittsburgh but is a familiar figure in the state. He worked as an aide to Democratic U.S. Rep. David Price of Chapel Hill before serving as an assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Transportation in the 1990s.

He takes the helm at a difficult time. A consultant last year described the state DOT as handicapped by turf battles and dysfunctional divisions.

"The mindset of my constituents is that DOT is wasteful," said state Rep. Bill McGee, a Clemmons Republican.

State Sen. David Hoyle, a Gastonia Democrat, said he hopes for better relations between N.C. DOT and the legislature.

"They need to rebuild a bridge of conversation and relationship with the General Assembly," said Hoyle, who chairs the Senate transportation committee. "I don't think that's what has happened (under Gov. Mike Easley) – they've done what they want to do, and to hell with us."

Business leaders at a conference in Raleigh on Monday voiced similar concerns.

Jerry Cook, vice president for government relations at Hanesbrands, said N.C. DOT needs to be more reliable when it promises highway improvements. Corporate leaders cannot make big plans that depend on highway projects that might get canceled, he said.

"There is no predictability," Cook said. "People are making changes in their operations, and they'll either move or they'll stay here and invest. And right now we're not sending very clear signals."

Conti didn't minimize the size of his task, saying that the state's transportation network must be rebuilt and the public's faith in the department restored.

"There is confidence to be restored among our citizens and between our citizens and their government," he said.

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[pintobeans](#) wrote on 01/06/2009 07:13:58 AM:

There's nothing to support the Lady Governor's claim here. The only thing Gene Conti did during his last stint in the NCDOT was maintain the status quo.

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