

Stepping Up To the Plate for Public Service

By Erin McCallum, President, Enterprise Washington

Who in their right mind would ever want to run for public office? Are you kidding me? With the state of the economy and the public scrutiny paid to a candidate, who would want to run?

But I would challenge each of us to consider running for public office, especially if you have skills from the private sector.

We live in a world economy where competition in the global marketplace is fierce. Washington State is uniquely positioned in the world market, given our geographic location. The success stories in our business community are many from building world class airplanes, inventing technology which is now part of our daily lives, making one darn good cup of coffee, creating fine wines, or growing some of the freshest produce that people enjoy throughout the world. We have an amazing private workforce that is the foundation of our state's success. In fact, our business community is the pulse of our state's health. Without it, we would not be the envy of the world and likely most of us would not call Washington State home.

However, looking inside the general community you see a melting pot of people, from all walks of life, personalities, experiences and political loyalties. But I bet that if you asked any of them to name something that influences their daily lives, they would likely say, their job.

A job is a good thing, especially in today's uncertain times. And it is the employer community – the private sector - that provides jobs that allows people to afford their lifestyles...lifestyles that fuel our economic engine. While jobs come from two other important sectors - non-profit and the public or government sectors - both of those rely on a strong and vibrant private sector to make their sustainability possible.

We are fortunate to live in a democracy where people have the privilege of voting and selecting their leaders. While much of the media focuses its attention on the national political scene, I would encourage each of us to think more locally, by sharing our experiences and knowledge that we have gained in the private sector by running for public office.

2009 is a year for many opportunities to serve in local office, from school board, to water, fire or hospital district, to city or county council. 2010 offers opportunities to serve in the state legislature, where women and men, democrat and republican, help shape public policy that betters our great state. While ours is only a part time legislature, the majority of our legislators view this job as full time, 365 days a year.

These citizen legislators pour through thousands of bills each legislative session, expected to make good decisions for our state that will have short term and long term implications. We assume that these legislators arrive in Olympia with skill sets and experience that will help guide them to ask the tough questions in their committee hearings so that they can make good decisions for the health of our economy and the state of the private sector. Some do, but many are short sighted and simply lack the

private sector experience to help them recognize what fuels our economy: a healthy business community. In fact, a survey by Enterprise Washington uncovered the fact that only 23% of legislators in our state even have a business background. The vast majority come from the non-profit or public sectors and have no idea what is needed for a healthy and flourishing private sector.

With our economic uncertainty, our state's growing deficit and large companies like Boeing repeatedly asking for a more business-friendly climate, we need leaders across our state that come from the private sector and are willing to put their experience where it counts.

Regardless of your party affiliation or independence, we have an opportunity to develop a strong coalition of citizen legislators who can offer their expertise in reading a balance sheet, writing a business plan and thinking strategically about the implications of legislation.

These days, too many in politics don't have any idea how to energize the private sector with solid public policy strategies to help turn around our economy. And we stand at the brink of economic disaster if we lose Boeing, Weyerhaeuser and other major economic drivers from this state's economic engine.

Take some time to consider sharing your business talents. We need you!

Erin McCallum is president of the non-profit, non-partisan, Enterprise Washington (www.enterprisewashington.org) and its Business Institute (www.businessinstitutewa.org), which help companies and employees to better understand how elected officials establish public policy, and to become more involved in the political process.