

Obama appoints his first openly gay administrator

by Lisa Keen

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California woman to chair environmental council

President-elect Barack Obama on Dec. 15 formally announced his first high-ranking openly gay appointee, naming Los Angeles deputy mayor Nancy Sutley as chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

Sutley, 46, is deputy mayor for Energy and Environment for the City of Los Angeles. She was, according to ABC News, a member of Hillary Clinton's LGBT steering committee in California. She served in the administration of President Bill Clinton as a senior policy advisor to the Environmental Protection Agency's regional administrator in San Francisco.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Sutley's parents immigrated to the United States from Argentina and she was raised in Queens, New York. Various news reports quoted people who know her as saying she is extremely bright and tends to avoid the limelight.

Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund President Chuck Wolfe called the nomination "another step toward full equality for gay Americans."

"It sends a signal to young people," he said, "that they can participate in their government at its highest levels, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender or ethnicity."

"I think we ought to celebrate it," said Virginia Apuzzo, a former assistant to the president for management and administration in the White House during the Clinton administration. Apuzzo said Sutley "will most certainly have the ear of the President's top folks."

"She will have the opportunity to be seen and heard on an important issue," said Apuzzo.

Meanwhile, LGBT leaders are pushing hard for an appointee who will be seen and heard in a bigger way. At a meeting with several top Obama transition team leaders Dec. 10, LGBT leaders had the appointment of an openly gay cabinet member at or near the top of their wish lists.

Wolfe, for instance, singled out openly gay National Zoo Director John Berry as "supremely qualified" for the position of Secretary of the Interior.

According to a written version of Wolfe's remarks, circulated after the meeting, Wolfe told transition leader John Podesta and others that, "while I know it is difficult to balance all of the competing interests in appointments, skipping John Berry requires making excuses."

"The excuse can't be that he isn't supremely qualified," Wolfe reportedly said, "and we hope it is not about discounting the importance of an openly LGBT cabinet member."

In addition to being director of the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., Berry was, under President Clinton, assistant secretary for policy, management and budget at the Interior. He has also served as head of the Congressionally sanctioned the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Brad Luna, a spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign, said Berry is also a member of that group's board and a "major donor."

The Secretary of Interior nominee doesn't normally get much scrutiny from the LGBT community. The position is largely charged with managing the nation's parks and wildlife reserves, overseeing drilling for oil and gas on public lands, and managing the country's natural resources. But the position is not without interest to the LGBT community. In 1993, organizers of a National March on Washington for LGBT rights had some run-ins with the National Park Service, after it balked at granting a permit for the march.

But this week, Obama announced U.S. Senator Ken Salazar (D-Colo.) as Secretary of Interior.

Salazar's overall voting record in the Senate was 85 (on a scale of zero to 100) on LGBT-related votes and positions, according to HRC's Congressional Scorecard.

Meanwhile, initial indications suggest Obama's pick this week of Chicago Public Schools Chief Arne Duncan to become Secretary of Education could be a good one for LGBT students. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Duncan has been supportive of establishing a "gay-friendly high school" in Chicago.

There have been kind words, too, for Obama's appointees for Secretary of Health and Human Services former U.S. Senator Tom Daschle -- and Secretary of Commerce -- New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson. Both men are generally seen as pro-gay and both departments have implications for the community. HHS is the primary source for funding HIV research and services to people with HIV. Commerce is charged with heading up varying population surveys -- including the census -- which has declined to ask questions that would provide estimates of the LGBT population.

The LGBT community apparently still has a chance at seeing an openly gay cabinet member. Mary Beth Maxwell, head of a national employee advocacy group, is reportedly on a short list of potential appointees to be Secretary of Labor. Maxwell, founder and head of American Rights at Work, is a member of the Human Rights Campaign and the Family Equality Council, an organization advocating on behalf of gay families.

Toward the hope of getting a cabinet-level appointment, a new group called Equal Rep has formed in Boston specifically to use "rapid online mobilization to lobby for the appointment or election of specific politicians."

The two-hour meeting

HRC President Joe Solmonese said leaders attending the meeting with transition leaders "made clear" the LGBT community "would be expecting" a cabinet level appointment.

"I don't know that anybody said it in a 'flag in the sand' kind of way," said Solmonese, "but we certainly talked about President-elect Obama's view of a diverse government and that it should include LGBT Americans. We expect him to be true to his word..."

Solmonese was involved in the Dec. 10 meeting with Podesta and five other transition officials. The meeting was initiated by the campaign as part of its effort to reach out to various constituencies. And, according to Solmonese, the two-hour meeting took place in Washington, D.C. Listening in, for the Obama transition, said Solmonese, were also Melody Barnes, his recently appointed head of the White House Office for Domestic Policy; Mike Strautmanis, chief of staff for the White House office for intergovernmental relations and public liaison; Dana Singiser, director of public liaison; Parag Mehta, the transition team's liaison to the LGBT community; Jim Messina, director of personnel; and several openly gay members of the transition team.

According to several reports, the group representing the LGBT community included more than two dozen LGBT leaders, including U.S. Reps. Barney Frank, Tammy Baldwin, and Rep.-elect Jared Polis; **Rea Carey of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**; Mandy Carter, co-chair of Obama PRIDE; Kevin Cathcart of Lambda Legal Defense; Rebecca Haag of AIDS Action Council (Haag is also executive director of the Boston-based AIDS Action Committee), Mara Keisling of the National Center for Transgender Equality; and Alexander Robinson of the National Black Justice Coalition.

Solmonese said he urged the team to ask President Obama to "make a strong statement early on" in his administration that he expects to sign an inclusive hate crimes bill and to give Congress a mandate to send a fully inclusive Employment Non-Discrimination Act to his desk.

"They were looking not just for names [for appointments]," said Solmonese, "but also our insights and suggestions" on what policies and legislation would have the greatest impact for LGBT people. Solmonese said he emphasized the importance of President Obama using his power through executive orders and gave the transition a list of possibilities. On that list, he said, were such things as having HHS remove HIV as a communicable disease and bar to immigration.

And on a final happy note, the Presidential Inaugural Committee announced last week that, for the first time ever, a gay-identified marching band has been invited to participate in the presidential inaugural parade.