

Who is Mary Burke?

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GREEN BAY - According to her friends in Madison, Mary Burke is so not a politician.

At least, that is the assessment of the former Commerce secretary and Trek Bicycle executive by a former colleague in Madison. But does it explain why a few months ago Burke wasn't on the radar screen of possible Democratic candidates for governor in 2014, and now she seems to be the hand picked candidate pushed by the party establishment.

One obvious advantage is that she could bring a boat load of her own money to the campaign. Should Burke decide to run, she has a fund raising edge over other Democrats because she is a multimillionaire. According to recent articles in the Madison newspapers, Burke paid on average \$103,000 in state taxes alone each of the past five years. She could, at least partially, self-finance her campaign.

According to the same reports, Burke has said she is considering entering the race but hasn't yet formed a campaign. She spent the past couple of months meeting with key Democrats and business leaders around the state to assess a possible run.

But Burke's only experience in elected office has been as a Madison School Board member since 2012. She has held several leadership roles during her career, mostly in the private and

nonprofit sectors, that party insiders hope could provide insight into what kind of governor she might be.

At Trek, the Waterloo-based company founded by her father in 1976, Burke oversaw the opening of offices in seven European countries and later developed its forecasting and strategic planning department. She also tutored poor minority children at the fledgling Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, which led to her joining the organization's board. In 2002, she became board president. She left Trek in 2004 to commit to raising \$6.25 million for the club's Allied Drive expansion.

Her business and philanthropic work caught the attention of then Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle, who in January 2005 appointed her Commerce secretary, a position she held for two-and-a-half years. She has also held other leadership roles on local boards, most notably in 2003 becoming the first female president of Maple Bluff Country Club, where she honed a single-digit golf handicap.

But having family money and running with the country club set have not been known to buy you love in traditional Democratic circles. Should she run for governor, Burke would be vying to become the first woman to hold the state's highest office, and the first female gubernatorial nominee for a major party ticket in Wisconsin. Another woman, State Senator Kathleen Vinehout, D-Alma, is also considering a run and more closely fits the traditional Democratic profile.

In addition, Statewide candidates typically come with more political experience than Burke. However, the recent election to the U.S. Senate of businessman Ron Johnson shows that doesn't have to be the end of the story, said Charles Franklin, a Marquette University Law School public policy professor. But Johnson is a Republican, and most Democrats have been quick to point out that business experience does not easily convert to the public sector.

Rep. Cory Mason, D-Racine, one of several Democrats who met with Burke to discuss her candidacy, said her success in different sectors make her an appealing candidate. He said many politicians, including himself, are waiting until Burke announces her plans before considering a possible run.

"What makes her exciting as a non-politician is she seems interested in the job and serving the state", Mason said. But is that enough for most Democrats to get over her patrician background, regardless of how much money she can bring to the election?

Republicans as usual, are preparing to paint Burke as an out-of-touch Madison liberal representing the policies of the Doyle administration.

As someone who has blatantly supported the failed policies of the past and whose candidacy was completely formed behind closed doors, it's clear that Mary Burke would have a hard time connecting with Main Street, Wisconsin, state Republican Party executive director Joe Fadness said when contacted by the Madison press.

Personal History

Burke was born in Madison in 1959, but grew up in Wauwatosa and Hartland near Milwaukee. She was the second oldest of five, and has three sisters and a brother, John, who now runs Trek.

She majored in finance at Georgetown University and received her MBA from Harvard Business School in 1985. Just before graduation, she asked her father for a job at Intrepid, his Brookfield-based holding company, but there wasn't an opening, so he turned her down.

Six months later, after working as a consultant in New York, she was hired at Intrepid as vice president of finance. But she soon missed the big city and returned to start Manhattan Intelligence, a service for consumers about businesses. It struggled to raise enough capital, and by 1990, she sold her stake and took a job leading Trek's European operations.

In one year, Burke opened offices in four countries, which meant setting up legal entities, hiring staff, leasing office space and establishing office protocol, said John Burke, who was her boss.

Steve Lindenau, who ran Trek's German operations at the time, said when he learned the company founder's daughter would be his boss, he wondered if it was a case of nepotism. It wasn't long before he considered Burke one of the smartest people he knew.

Lindenau was used to making decisions from the gut based on his experience growing up around bike shops. Burke insisted on a different approach based on analyzing data and assembling all available information.

The business changed (to) being less of an emotional way of making decisions and more of a pragmatic approach, said Lindenau, who now runs two bicycle companies in California. It was helpful for the bottom line, for sure.

Burke left Trek, and Europe, after agreeing her position was redundant and took six months off to snowboard in Argentina and Colorado - a decision Republicans have already criticized, citing polling done on that detail by Democrats.

After working at a bicycle industry trade organization, Burke returned to Trek in Wisconsin in 1995 to work on global sales forecasts. John Burke said his sister came in and tore the process apart using data analysis to reduce inventory levels and increase profits. It went from one of the worst things we did as a company to one of the best, he said. Mary has always been somebody who takes a look at things and thinks it can be done better.

Boys & Girls Club

Burke applied her business acumen as president of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, but it led to friction with the club's executive director, Juan Jose Lopez.

Burke started as a tutor in 1998, but it wasn't long before the club's founding president, Peter Brey, and founding director, the Rev. David Smith, took her to a University of Wisconsin basketball game to talk up joining the board.

Burke flexed her executive skills on the board - reviewing financial statements on weekends, generating fundraising ideas and laying the groundwork for transforming the South Side neighborhood club into a citywide organization. In 2002, she was unanimously elected president by fellow board members.

She was focused, she had the ability to raise money, she loved the cause and she had the Rolodex that is such a key part of getting anything done in those particular arenas, Brey said.

Lopez came on as executive director around the same time, and a conflict emerged between them as Burke micromanaged the day-to-day operations of the club, Smith said.

Mary wasn't going to be pushed around by anybody, including her executive director, Smith said. She broke a few eggs, but she made a wonderful omelet, and the community is still eating that omelet.

Brey said Burke and Lopez had different views on how to move the organization forward, and Lopez wasn't executing the way Burke wanted. Lopez declined to comment.

To get to where it is now, there's never easy decisions, but no one can argue the path they took has led to one of the most successful organizations in the entire Boys & Girls Club family, Brey said, and Mary was the driving force.

When Lopez's successor, Marcia Hendrickson, also left abruptly, Burke held the position unpaid for about six months before hiring current executive director Michael Johnson in late 2009. The two agreed the director was in charge of day-to-day club operations and the board was in charge of governance.

Johnson credits Burke with putting in place the strongest financial controls he's seen at a nonprofit organization. A board officer must sign off on expenses over \$1,000, and all mail must be opened by two club employees. An employee had embezzled money from the organization before Burke joined the board.

In the past decade, the organization has increased the number of children it serves from 300 to 3,000, expanded the bike ride fundraiser Burke started from \$50,000 to \$400,000 and grown its operating budget from \$250,000 to \$3.5 million.

Burke also started the AVID/TOPS student achievement partnership with the Madison School District, raised money for the Allied Drive expansion and established a \$1.5 million operating endowment. She is the club's top donor.

Mary is real big on numbers, real big on data and real big on results, Johnson said. She's a no-nonsense person to make sure that the people around her feel valued, but there's a sense of direction and a sense of focus.

Commerce Department

As secretary of the state's Commerce Department, Burke managed 400 employees and a \$221 million budget. Madison economic development director Aaron Olver - who was Burke's deputy secretary and later Commerce secretary under Doyle - said his first impression of Burke was she didn't come from the political establishment.

She introduced lean manufacturing principles in the department, seeking to reduce waste and improve efficiency. For example, after learning that each office in the department bought its own supplies, she created a central supply depot for everyone to use.

Dissatisfied with the lack of employee input in decision-making, Burke created employee labor management councils to help solve problems in the department.

Her M.O. is to get the right table of folks together to tackle a problem, Olver said.

Like other secretaries, much of Burke's time was spent negotiating economic development loans with private companies. That included a multimillion-dollar package to help reopen a struggling paper mill in Park Falls and build a biofuel refinery to make the company profitable.

Last fall, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp., which replaced the Commerce Department in 2011, reported that it had lost track of \$12.2 million in defaulted loans, including about \$5 million from the Park Falls company.

Olver described Burke as so not a politician because she was never one to think about image or campaign donations or public opinion. At the time, she described herself as an independent but leaned more Democratic by the time she left the job, Olver said.

She did not come in thinking about the politics or optics of her decisions, Olver said. She came in focused on problem-solving and getting results.

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Source: [Madison Newspapers](#)

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