

FoodHub in the News



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By Mitch Lies

Champ of Rural Oregon

Vicki Walker's job is to stand up for the state's little guy

Salem, Oregon – Four months into serving on the Oregon Parole Board, former state Sen. Vicki Walker received a call from the Obama administration asking her to become state director of USDA's Rural Development.

Thirty minutes later, Walker was on the phone with Gov. Ted Kulongoski.

"I called the governor and said, 'I'm sorry, the president trumps the governor,'" she said.

"I think what (the Obama administration) was looking for was someone who understood rural communities and someone who knew how to fight really hard to get what we need out of these (Rural Development) programs," Walker said.

"And I think my legislative career speaks for itself," Walker said. "I never took no for an answer."

Now, one year into the job, Walker is seen as a driving force behind improving conditions in rural Oregon.

"She is really an advocate for the little guy," said Peter Hainley, executive director of Community and Shelter Assistance Corp. of Oregon. "This year was the first year in 12 years we've had two farmworker housing projects funded through Rural Development in the same year."

"She moved barriers," said Cyndi Cook of Housing Works, a Central Oregon housing organization that worked with Walker on securing funding for a farmworker housing project in Madras.

At first blush, Walker, a Eugene Democrat, was an unlikely choice to lead Oregon's USDA Rural Development.

But Walker, who graduated from high school in the small coastal town of Reedsport, has small-town roots. And her political and business connections make her a natural choice.

"I love small-town Oregon," Walker said.

A former court reporter, Walker in her first year used her business connections to help investors secure a loan to start a dialysis clinic in Coos Bay.

"I knew the CEO of Summit Bank (in Eugene) and we were able to provide a business guarantee loan so people didn't have to drive all the way (from the south Oregon coast) to Eugene to get to a dialysis clinic," she said.

USDA's multibillion dollar Rural Development agency is all about helping improve conditions in rural America.

Loans and grants provided by the agency are designed to improve housing, infrastructure and help rural businesses develop and thrive.

“There are lots of people out there with inadequate housing that need their plumbing fixed, their roof fixed. They’ve got buckets because it leaks. They can’t get hooked up to the sewer because they don’t have the money.

“And our programs provide grants and loans to those folks,” Walker said.

USDA annually allocates a dedicated amount of Rural Development funds to each state. Other funds are distributed on a competitive basis.

A state measures its success by how many loans and grants its gets out the door.

“For me, it is more than that,” Walker said. “It’s how many jobs you’ve created and how many jobs you’ve saved.”

Once a state depletes its allocated resources, it can apply for additional funds out of a pool built from states that didn’t deplete their allotment.

“I always want to be asking for more (at the end of the year),” she said.

States also measure success in how they fare in national grant competitions.

Walker worked with Rural Development Deputy Undersecretary Victor Vasquez to help Oregon’s Food Hub receive one of five national rural business opportunity grants this year. Vasquez, a Hermiston, Ore., native, once worked in former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts’ administration.

“We took Victor Vasquez out to see a demonstration of Food Hub, and he saw the potential,” she said.

Rural Development’s total program assistance in Oregon in 2010 topped \$613 million, well above the previous high of \$547 million obligated in 2009.

“We’re all pretty tired around here,” said Jeff Deiss, business program director for Oregon’s USDA Rural Development. “She’s keeping us, working really hard.”

“We’ve been fortunate to have a string of excellent state directors who have been widely respected in Rural Development,” Deiss said, “and Vicki has continued that tradition.”

As a court reporter who worked bankruptcy cases for many years, Walker said she has seen her share of hardship. Now, in a position where she can help people, she is embracing her role.

“What was special for me about coming into this job is we can create jobs, we can save jobs, we can hopefully keep people out of bankruptcy court and foreclosure,” she said.

“I’ve seen that side,” she said.

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