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**State tourism secretary says she’s driven by data, not politics**

WIsconsin Tourism Secretary Sarah Meaney is promising to fix a situation in which the agency botched an election for officers on an advisory council, blaming it partly on guidance she says the department received from Scott Walker’s administration.

But Meaney rejected the charge she is politicizing the department, telling WisPolitics.com in mid-November she is driven by data, not politics.

Amid questions of whether attempts to elect officers for the Governor’s Council on Tourism broke open meetings laws, conservative critics have begun to lob charges at Meaney. That includes the suggestion the agency is looking to focus promotional efforts more on Madison and Milwaukee at the expense of other areas of the state.

Meaney countered the agency is simply looking for options to attract more visitors and research shows Wisconsin lags the rest of the Midwest in attracting younger and more diverse travelers.

“This does not mean to the exclusion of the existing base. It means we can do more to attract more people to spend more dollars here,” said Meaney, who was chief marketing and development officer of Milwaukee Film before her cabinet appointment. “That is not a political agenda. That is an economic agenda. That’s how I see my job making the most sense.”

Fresh on the heels of the Senate rejecting Brad Pfaff as DATCP secretary, Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, singled out Meaney as another of Gov. Tony Evers’ cabinet picks who could fail to win confirmation from the GOP-controlled chamber. He cited reports about the mishandled officer election, while other critics have accused Meaney of inappropriately trying to pressure a longtime council member to resign.

GOP state Sen. Andre Jacque, chair of the Senate’s Local Government, Small Business, Tourism and Workforce Development Committee, has been sharply critical of Meaney over the suggestion she pressured Kathy Kopp, the longtime executive director of the Platteville Area Chamber of Commerce, to resign early from the Tourism Council.

In a communication to Meaney last month, Jacque wrote Meaney’s criteria for future council appointments were “primarily weighted toward ethnic and cultural diversity” and suggested the agency’s job is to promote Wisconsin, “not to promote a political agenda — checking a racially-based box should not come before qualifications.”

The De Pere Republican said in a recent interview he hasn’t been able to connect with Meaney to follow up on his concerns and largely declined to weigh in on her comments in the WisPolitics.com interview.

“I still have a number of questions I’d like to get answers to,” Jacque said, adding he’s “reserving comment” on whether Meaney should be confirmed.

Meaney chalked up the suggestion she pressured Kopp to resign to a misunderstanding, saying she was inquiring about Kopp’s plans to retire from the Platteville Area Chamber of Commerce and a “health challenge” for her husband. Meaney said her intent was to see how the two impacted her term on the council, which isn’t up until 2021.

Kopp said she was caught off guard by Meaney’s questioning in their October conversation. She told WisPolitics.com she assured Meaney her husband was fine after a minor stroke in August and that even though she was retiring from the chamber, she had planned to remain part of the council.

Kopp also said she quizzed Meaney on whether her eventual replacement would be from southwestern Wisconsin as well. Kopp said Meaney told her she couldn’t offer any assurances and geography wasn’t going to be the priority but to be “more inclusive and diverse.”

“That probably led to my decision to reaffirm to myself that southwest Wisconsin needs to be represented,” Kopp said of deciding to fill out her term.

Kopp also was one of those who was seeking an officer’s spot in the voting by council members. The first attempt last month began with council members receiving a link to vote online. They were then asked to repeat the process because some members had voted more than once. Amid concerns that the process violated the state’s open meetings laws, it was ultimately scrapped.

Meaney said the agency believed it was following past practice in how it handled the election, including voting electronically. She said the council will now elect officers at its next public meeting — which hasn’t been scheduled yet — and rejected the suggestion she is trying to stack its membership, noting state statutes include requirements for geographic representation, as well as various segments of the tourism industry.

The council’s 21 members include 14 gubernatorial appointments, the Tourism secretary, the executive secretary of the Arts Board, the director of the Historical Society, and four lawmakers, one from each party in each house. There are currently two vacancies.

She also ticked off a series of successes in both the tourism industry and the agency this year. That includes entertainment and recreation taxable sales rising at twice the rate of the previous three-year average. The agency also has seen five straight months of more than 1 million users interacting with its website, which she said was a new record.

Refuting the suggestion she’s been focused on Madison and Milwaukee, she said 80% of her time outside the office has been spent in places other than the state’s two largest cities.

Meaney’s appointment received a public hearing in March, and she cleared Jacque’s committee 5-0 on Sept. 11.

Meaney said her staff reached out to Senate Republicans after they caucused last month — before the issues arose with the vote and Kopp — and none expressed an interest in meeting again or any concerns with her appointment.

“I’m just keeping my eye on the ball, going around, doing my job and I think the results will speak for themselves,” she said.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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