

Update from the state capital

New administration means potential changes.

As a new governor takes office for the first time in eight years, the potential for change in Tallahassee is very real. To get an update on early signals of potential change that could impact area businesses, *Smart Business* interviewed Melanie Hines, an administrative law attorney and long-time participant in developments at the state capital. Prior to entering private practice, Hines spent more than 20 years in government service in Tallahassee, with the last 12 of them as head of a statewide office.

What are some of the early signals of change coming out of Tallahassee?

I think it's safe to say that business executives should not expect radical changes. This election was not a message from the voters of the need for major change at the state level. That being said, our new governor, Charlie Crist, is certainly his own man with his own views of improvements that need to be made. And Alex Sink, our new chief financial officer, a former banker with fiscally conservative credentials, brings a new approach to the challenges facing the state and its residents. As such, some change is inevitable.

So early in a new administration, how does one get a sense of likely changes?

The starting point is always the basis on which someone campaigned. More so than ever, politicians recognize the importance of delivering on campaign promises.

Second, one has to look to the person and what their experiences and philosophies have been over their adult years.

Third, transition team documents and the governor's inaugural address reflect the top priorities.

Finally, their senior appointments speak volumes as to likely directions.

What do you take away from early reports about their plans for their first 100 days in office?

No surprise to any Floridian, Gov.



Melanie Hines
Administrative Law team
Berger Singerman

Crist and CFO Sink are very concerned about the dual burdens on real estate owners of property taxes and skyrocketing property insurance rates. As to the latter, the governor called a special session of the Florida Legislature for mid-January 'to begin an effort to restructure Florida's property insurance market and provide relief to Florida residents and businesses.'

Business owners and executives will want to be sure that the solutions that benefit the masses are not detrimental to their specific business. As often happens with governmental action, what helps one group may well be at a cost to another.

Business people ought to be encouraged by the submission of the Florida Capital Formation Act for consideration by the legislature. This bill will address ways to continue the state's focus on making Florida a leader in medical and bioscience research and development. The quality jobs and spin-off benefits to our educational system make this important for all Floridians, and growing Florida in this way this was one of Gov. Crist's campaign themes. Educating Florida's work force is also one of his top priorities.

What is your opinion on Gov. Crist's early senior appointments?

I am very encouraged by the early appointments. I believe they reflect the governor's commitment to establish an ethical, transparent and hard-working administration that will reflect Florida's diversity and facilitate multi-faceted dialogue on important issues.

On a personal level, I was thrilled to see him select former Attorney General Bob Butterworth, with whom I had the pleasure to work closely for 12 years, as Secretary for the Department of Children and Families. This appointment proves that Gov. Crist believes in putting problem-solving over partisan politics, which bodes well for his administration and the state.

I am also gratified — as business owners should be — that CFO Sink has elevated the fraud division profile within the agency by appointing the former chief of investigations to a deputy commissioner position. Insurance fraud costs Florida businesses millions of dollars each year, so constant vigilance against it is important.

What final words of advice would you give to a business executive?

Like every state, Florida faces some challenging economic issues. Solutions generally cost money, and successful business executives will want to be aware of new regulations or new taxes that can impact their business. Business executives generally can't afford to make what is going on in Tallahassee their primary focus, but they can't afford not to be informed, so they will want to watch for changes through their local chamber of commerce, state industry trade associations, and/or their law firm. One key to success is to stay on top of regulatory issues.

MELANIE HINES is a member of the Administrative Law team of Berger Singerman and resident in the firm's Tallahassee office. Read more about how Berger Singerman is assisting business owners and companies to effectively deal with federal, state and local regulation, online at www.bergersingerman.com.