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**Saturday, December 4, 2004**

**Eastern Shore News**

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# Bloxom mulled for state ag secretary

**By Kara Glascoe**  
A reporter for the Capital News Service

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**RICHMOND --** A key legislator is suggesting that the governor appoint former Del. Robert S. Bloxom of Mappsville as Virginia's first secretary of agriculture and forestry.

Del. R. Steven Landes, who sponsored the bill that created the new Cabinet position, said Bloxom would be an "excellent" choice to oversee the state's agricultural industry, which accounts for 10 percent of Virginia's jobs.

Landes, a Republican who represents the 25th House District in Northwest Virginia, said he communicated his sentiments to Gov. Mark Warner's office.

Warner is expected to name his agriculture secretary soon, Landes said during a visit this week to his alma mater, Virginia Commonwealth University.

During the 2004 legislative session, Landes sponsored House Bill 1212, which sailed through the General Assembly. Under the law, the new secretary will oversee the Department of Forestry, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the Virginia Agricultural Council and the



Jay Diem Photo

**Retired Del. Robert S. Bloxom holds a pepper and Hayman potato in his Mappsville auto-parts store. Bloxom, a 13-term former member of the House of Delegates, has been mentioned as a candidate to be the state's first secretary of agriculture and forestry.**

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Virginia Marine Products Board. Currently, those agencies fall under the secretary of commerce and trade, Michael J. Schewel.

The governor's Cabinet includes 10 secretaries in charge of such areas as education, public safety and transportation. With the new position, agriculture will have its own seat in the executive branch's inner circle -- and a direct audience with the governor.

Bloxom, a Republican, represented the Eastern Shore in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1978 through 2003, when he decided not to seek re-election. The seat was won last year by a Democrat, Lynwood W. Lewis Jr. of Accomac.

In an interview this week, Bloxom said he would be interested in serving as the commonwealth's agriculture secretary. "I think it would be a real challenge to be in a position to be of some help to the agricultural and the rural community."

Ellen Qualls, the governor's press secretary, said Warner is expected to announce his choice for the position before the year's end. She said she did not know who was under consideration or who would be chosen.

"I suspect some groups have weighed in on the issue, like the Virginia Agribusiness Council and the Virginia Farm Bureau," Qualls said.

Indeed, the Virginia Agribusiness Council has discussed possible candidates with Warner's office.

"But all of our talks with the governor's office have been confidential," said Donna Pugh Johnson, the council's president.

Without offering names, Johnson said the council would like to see "someone knowledgeable of the industry and someone proven to be an advocate for agriculture and forestry."

Johnson said the new secretary would not necessarily have to be a farmer. "I prefer it not be just a political appointment ... but someone that will provide the governor with a strong voice for the industry."

Bloxom, who is president of an auto supply company, represented the counties of Accomack and Northampton and parts of the cities of Hampton and Norfolk. He served on the House Committee on Agriculture, the Chesapeake Bay and Natural Resources. He also chaired the Chesapeake Bay Commission, a tri-state group that works to clean up and protect the bay.

"My home district being the Eastern Shore -- where 80 percent of vegetables in the state of Virginia are grown in these two counties -- I've had a lot of contact with the farmers," Bloxom said.

"My business in many ways depends upon the farmer. ... You have to keep their tractors running and the trucks running and their vehicles running, and I'm right here with the parts when they have a problem."

Qualls said Warner, a Democrat, wants someone who not only is knowledgeable about agriculture but also can work with the Republican-dominated Legislature.

It would not be unprecedented for Warner to appoint Bloxom. The governor has touted his bipartisanship and has appointed other Republicans to positions in his administration. For example, former state Sen. Jane Woods of Fairfax is Warner's secretary of health and human resources.

Closer to home, Warner appointed Bloxom's son, Robert S. Bloxom Jr. of Mappsville, to Virginia's Aquaculture Advisory Board in 2002. Robert Bloxom Jr., owner of the Good Gut Oyster Co., also was elected in 1999 as a soil and water conservation director for Accomack County.

When Del. Bloxom retired as representative of the 100th House District, he told the media he was frustrated with politics.

He still is, he said, but he wants to serve the community.

"I've never really enjoyed politics -- not the political side," Bloxom said. "I have thoroughly enjoyed the community-service side and being able to feel like you're being helpful to people and do things."

Toward the end of his 26 years in the House, he said, he had trouble seeing how he was helping people. "It was time for me to step aside."

Being agricultural secretary would be different from being a delegate, because he would have an opportunity to work more on statewide issues and with people across Virginia, Bloxom said.

If chosen, Bloxom said he would like to establish a "brain trust -- people who are involved in different segments of the industry."

"The farmer's marketing system has a part to play, the cattle industry has a part to play, the forestry industry has a very definite part to play," he said.

"So, as you go through that whole process, you need to build a structure that will last into the future -- that will be helpful and beneficial to those people."

Kara Glascoe is a student at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

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