

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

A conversation with outgoing Gov. John Baldacci

Kevin Miller

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AUGUSTA — On Jan. 5, thousands of spectators will gather in Augusta to watch as Democratic Gov. John Baldacci officially steps aside and the administration of Republican Paul LePage completes the two-month-long transition into power.

For Baldacci, the LePage inauguration will mark the end of a political career that began in the Bangor City Council chambers and took him to the State House, to the corridors of power in Washington, D.C., and last to the Blaine House.

Now, more than 30 years after entering public office, Baldacci and his wife, Karen, are planning their own transition to a more private lifestyle as the couple resettles in the Bangor region.

“I just like the area,” Baldacci said Friday during an interview in his State House office. “I grew up in the area. I was born and raised in the area. That’s home.”

So what, exactly, is next for the soon-to-be former governor?

“What I’ve told people is I’m not interested in running for any other political office,” he said.

But like most governors before him, Baldacci does not plan to withdraw from public life entirely just because he has left public office. While he was mum on specifics, Baldacci said he wants to stay active working on energy — a major focus of his administration in recent years — as well as health care issues.

He also plans to continue working with at-risk youth, including continuing his service as chairman of the board of directors of Jobs for America’s Graduates, a national nonprofit with programs in Maine.

The governor said several schools also have spoken to him about leading seminars or teaching at the college level, but he said those likely would be further down the line.

“I haven’t got any plans at this point,” Baldacci said. “What people have told me is ‘Figure out what gives you passion ... and what do you want to be doing that motivates you.’”

Baldacci’s interest in working on energy issues post-governor is no secret. He has made development of renewable energy — particularly wind energy — a major focal point of his administration even before the oil crisis of 2008 when “going green” became a national trend.

The administration enacted rules to expedite the regulatory review process for land-based wind farms — much to the dismay of the industry’s critics and some landowners — and has also sought to streamline the permitting process for projects that tap into the winds and tides in the Gulf of Maine to produce electricity.

The Baldacci administration has touted the use of biomass energy and invested large sums in household and commercial weatherization projects.

“I want us to maximize those resources so that we can become more energy dependent on our own resources and not dependent on others, and I think that’s what our country needs to do more of,” Baldacci said.

“I’m very passionate about that and I care about that. So I would imagine wherever I’m located I will try to

continue to espouse those themes.”

A Bangor native, Baldacci was one of eight children and got his start in politics at age 23 when he was elected to the Bangor City Council. He would later represent the city for 12 years in the state Legislature before voters in Maine’s 2nd Congressional District sent him to Washington, D.C., in 1994.

After eight years on Capitol Hill, Baldacci captured 47 percent of the votes to beat out three other candidates for the Blaine House in November 2002. He was re-elected in November 2006 with 38 percent of the vote in a five-way race.

Seated in his office, Baldacci said he was looking forward to moving back to the Bangor region but said, in the meantime, there is ample work to fill his hours during the next six-plus weeks.

On Friday, Baldacci was one among the hundreds of mourners who attended the Augusta funeral for Cpl. Andrew Hutchins, a New Portland native who was killed earlier this month while serving in Afghanistan. Baldacci described such duties as some of the most difficult but important responsibilities of his office.

Also this past week Baldacci has involved himself in the contract negotiations between hospital administrators and nurses at Eastern Maine Medical Center as well as a dispute between two railroads that threatens up to 650 jobs at a Madawaska paper mill.

“It is a job that goes 24-7 and you have to make sure you are giving it 100 percent every single day,” he said. “At the same time, as we work with the new administration since the election, you have to make sure they have all of the tools and resources and support so that they’ll be completely prepared to take office on Jan. 5.”

Now 55, Baldacci and his wife plan to move into their recently purchased home in Holden after taking a few weeks off to spend time with family on the beach and near the golf courses in Florida. Their son, Jack, is a student at the University of Maine.

Asked his thoughts about moving back home, Baldacci ticked off a host of reasons he is excited about the Bangor region, including the redevelopment of the waterfront area, the revitalization of downtown, and UMaine’s academic, athletic and research programs.

“It’s nice to see the energy in the region,” he said.

For years before the governor made a name for himself in politics, the Baldacci name was arguably best known in the Bangor area for his family’s Italian restaurant.

After he was elected to Congress and the Blaine House, Baldacci continued to occasionally put in hours in the restaurant kitchen and even took the meals on the road, serving spaghetti dinners and meeting voters in small towns across Maine.

Momma Baldacci’s closed in 2006 not long after the death of the governor’s brother Paul, who ran the restaurant in its later years. It reopened briefly under the name Baldacci’s, but ever since serving its last meal, there has been talk that the family would reopen the restaurant in a new location.

Asked whether that might be one of his post-political endeavors, Baldacci acknowledged that he was interested in the business but said that was “probably further down the road” after his feet were more firmly replanted in the community.

“I want to start hooking back up with people and get those roots firmly established again and be with my brothers and sisters,” he said.

But he added: “I’ve still got all of the recipes.”