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Coming Full Circle

Commissioner Larry R. Soward is back at his old stomping grounds. His career in state government began at one of the TCEQ's predecessor agencies.

New commissioner returns to agency that launched his government career

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When Larry R. Soward has a job to do, he sizes up the task at hand and plunges in with a determination to take no more time than necessary.

That no-nonsense attitude explains how he finished college in a little more than three years, blazed through law school in 26 months, then tackled a series of legal and administrative jobs in state government that earned him increasing responsibility and visibility.

It's also one of the attributes that led to Soward's selection for a position he describes as his "dream job." This fall, Gov. Rick Perry nominated Soward to a six-year term as a TCEQ commissioner.

"I started my state career as a hearings examiner at the old Texas Water Quality Board, which preceded the TCEQ," Soward recalled. "I fell in love then with the agency and the subject matter, so to sit as one of three commissioners of the agency I started at is a dream fulfilled. I'm very excited to be here."

The 54-year-old brings years of experience in government and the environment. He spent more than 12 years at the Texas Water Quality Board, later renamed the Texas Water Commission, where he began by conducting adjudicative public hearings in all areas of the agency's regulatory responsibilities. A series of advancements led him to the office of executive director from 1985 through 1987.

Soward went on to serve in executive management at the Public Utility Commission, the Department of Agriculture and the General Land Office. He spent most of 2003 on the staff of Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, managing the divisions of administration, research, budget, constituent correspondence, and inter-governmental affairs.

Admittedly, it's been a long journey for Soward, who was the first in his family to attend college. He was born into a family that farmed in North Texas near the Red River. The basic lifestyle taught him to appreciate the finer things in life, he says, recalling, "We didn't have indoor plumbing until I was five."

While attending public schools in Carrollton, Soward began thinking about becoming a teacher. But spending time with an uncle, who loved to spin stories about his years as a lawyer and supreme court justice in Oklahoma, led the young student to become fascinated with the law. At the University of Texas at Austin, he majored in mathematics. He completed UT law school in 1974.

Soward's professional experience allowed him to watch the evolution of environmental regulation and protection in Texas. Dealing with natural resources was much simpler more than two decades ago, he remembers.

"There weren't as many federal programs then--with all the complexity that they bring--and on the state level environmental issues were still very basic. Not that many people were openly concerned about the environment, and you didn't have the pollution that you do today with the extent of development Texas has had. So rather than having whole communities or environmental groups getting involved in issues, it was usually individuals who lived downstream from or near a pollution source, or folks who wanted competing water rights or uses."

By contrast, environmental issues today are immersed in state and federal programs and often generate extensive public debate.



Government veteran Larry R. Soward has begun serving a six-year term as a TCEQ commissioner. A lawyer by training, he has worked in high-level administrative and legal positions at several state agencies. In all, Soward has accrued 28 years of experience with the state.

"All that's evidence that we've grown into a state that is extremely diverse--both as to our huge population and our business and industry. We're also a state with a rich ecology and a multitude of regional issues, so you can see this has become a very complex arena."

Soward says he brings to the commissioners' office a steadfast belief that Texas can, and must, strike a balance between economic development and growth and sound protection of its natural resources and environment.

"The reason people want to live here is because of the quality of life we enjoy. As we see more people moving to Texas and more businesses being attracted here, this growth really can go hand in hand with environmental protection."

The key is to bring all viewpoints into discussions, he says, adding, "That's my role--to look at all aspects of every issue."

People who have worked with Soward say his desire to be exposed to all viewpoints and available information shows up in his work habits.

"Without a doubt, I am detail oriented," he allows. "I'm also impatient when it comes to needlessly dragging things out. That's how I felt about college: why take four years to do something when you can do it in three?"

Soward further admits having "orange blood" when it comes to sports. He's a UT fan during football, baseball, and basketball seasons. And on many weekends he can be found in the nursery of his favorite home improvement store. After filling his downtown condominium with plants, he glassed in the balcony to accommodate the full collection, which numbers more than 100 containers.

A current events buff, he keeps his office TV tuned to an all-news network during the day. "I don't like surprises," he says. "I like to know what's going on."

With Soward's experience in government affairs and environmental issues, he'll likely stay ahead of the curve.

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In Brief--Larry R. Soward

Education

University of Texas at Austin, Bachelor of Arts
University of Texas School of Law

Employment

Texas Water Commission, 1975-1987
Environmental law practice, 1988-1990
Public Utility Commission, 1990-1992
Texas Department of Agriculture, 1992-1998
General Land Office, 1999-2002
Lieutenant Governor's Office, 2003

Changes on the Commission

Starting this fall, TCEQ commissioners have a new presiding officer. Commissioner Kathleen Hartnett White was tapped by Gov. Rick Perry to head up the agency's three-member commission. White, who joined the TCEQ two years ago, succeeds outgoing Chairman Robert J. Huston.

Newcomer Larry R. Soward was appointed to the commission in October. He joins Commissioner R.B. "Ralph" Marquez, who has been a commissioner since 1995.

The trio is responsible for establishing agency direction and policy and for making final determinations on contested permitting and enforcement matters.

The appointments, which require consent of the Senate, are for staggered six-year terms.

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