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Cardwell takes political plunge

Businessman will seek council seat to succeed Phil Borst; says former President Reagan spurred him to public service

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In phone call after phone call, the news that Phil Borst would not seek re-election to the City-County Council sunk in with Jeff Cardwell.

Borst's decadeslong friend had an immediate response.

"My first thought that came to mind was, 'Great, we have a new mayor candidate,' " Cardwell said. "When I called Phil to talk to him about it, he said it was just time for him to step back."

While Borst's 28-year run representing the Southside will end Dec. 31, Cardwell's political career is just beginning.

Cardwell, 47, president of Cardwell Do-it Best Home Center on Madison Avenue, and co-founder of the charitable World In Need organization, officially has filed to run for Borst's District 23 seat.

It was Borst who first approached Cardwell in the 1980s about volunteering on local Republican campaigns.

The friendship blossomed, and for the past 12 years, Cardwell has served as Borst's campaign chairman. The roles will be reversed, however, as Borst has agreed to chair Cardwell's run for office.

"He's very involved with the community," Borst said of his friend. "He's light years ahead of where I was 28 years ago. He'll be 10 times better than I was."

While Borst planted the local political seed with Cardwell, it was Ronald Reagan who first inspired a 20-something entrepreneur to volunteer his time.

Cardwell's housing and lumber businesses was hit hard during the recession of the early 1980s. Reagan's optimistic image of America's potential struck a nerve with Cardwell.

"It was very inspirational to a young entrepreneur," he said. "I always enjoyed his speeches. I was uplifted and inspired."

Soon after, Cardwell was handing out buttons and putting up signs in support of Reagan's presidential campaign.

Cardwell heard Reagan's message in person when the presidential candidate gave a speech to a small legion of volunteers at the Indiana Roof Ballroom.

"He inspired us and challenged us to stay involved and said that we could make a difference," Cardwell said. "I never forgot those words. I like to say that I'm a person of action. It's one thing to cast a vision, but to implement it is totally different."

Cardwell can speak from experience.

He, along with area business leaders, formed the Gateway Business Alliance, a grass-roots group focused on economic development initiatives along the Madison Avenue corridor.

A public servant's goals, Cardwell reasoned, are similar to what the alliance is trying to bring about on the Southside.

"One of the things we're trying to accomplish is economic development, public safety, rebuilding and reenergizing a community through public and private partnerships," said Cardwell, also describing his platform. "It fit perfectly with a life plan of action that I have been living privately for the past 30 years."

Cardwell admits there are challenges, such as crime and cleaning up worn-down neighborhoods.

"Before you can have economic development, you must have safety," he said. "We must create public and private partnerships with our law enforcement, and create neighborhood liaisons with our police departments. Police departments can't do it all on their own; neither can homeowners associations and business groups."

From entrepreneur to political candidate, Cardwell -- the Republican Party's slated candidate for the council seat -- is looking ahead.

"I feel I have learned a lot from the business world that I have served," he said. "I believe this is a new chapter in my life that I can apply those same skills to the public sector to make a difference."