

# Taking a different course

By Scott Mooneyham, NCLM Advocacy Communications Strategist

Sen. Joel Ford does not shy away from letting people know that he sees himself as a bit different. “I like to tell people I’m a recovering entrepreneur,” he said recently while preparing for a Senate floor session. The Charlotte Democrat cites his business background -- as the former owner of a waste management firm, an earth-moving business and a restaurant – as a key inspiration for his decision in 2012 to run for the state Senate seat that he now holds.

It’s not the sole reason he chose to run nor is it the only thing that has defined and shaped Ford’s views as a legislator. He has also served as guardian ad litem, on a local board overseeing guardian ad litem services, on the board of managers for a local YMCA, and as chair of the Charlotte Housing Authority Board of Directors.

Then there is his political involvement. Ford was chair of the Mecklenburg County Democratic Party from 2008 until 2011.

At times, that background has put him at odds with his own party. At other times, he has been one of the louder critics of the majority party in the Senate. First elected in 2012, Ford explained a little about his approach as a legislator in a recent interview.

**Was there anything specifically that you saw as a business owner that made you say, “I want to do something about this in the political arena?”**

I had to live out the public policy that was already set. In some instances, that public policy was not conducive to or did not contribute to growing my business. So, I wanted to bring



Sen. Ford is active in Charlotte-area nonprofits as a board member and volunteer. Photo credit: Jessica Wells



Sen. Rick Gunn of Alamance County speaks with Sen. Ford. Photo credit: Jessica Wells

that perspective to the legislature and hopefully make a contribution toward common sense public policy.

**But you also have perspectives outside of business and outside of your professional life, through other endeavors. Is that a part of it too?**

We have a ton of opportunities for people to volunteer and serve in our communities. When I look

at someone's resume and they are running for public office, and they haven't done anything in the community, that should be a red flag. I am currently on the board for the Renaissance West Initiative (in Charlotte), which is a nonprofit developing mixed income housing, combined with early childhood education, quality K-8 public schools

and health and wellness facilities. It is a first of its kind in the state holistic community. I am very excited about that.

**You have developed a reputation as someone who has been able to reach across the aisle and work with the majority party. What do you attribute that to, and how has that**

**been in terms of working within your own political caucus?**

I have to first say I am more concerned with people in my district than I am with people in my political party. I would say that it does have a lot to do with my business background and my core values. Those two things, as best as possible, allow me to fit in and make a contribution.

**Now in your second term, have any of the workings of the legislature caught you by surprise?**

Surprise ... I don't know. But the reality is that, the way the process works, we are a full-time legislature. We have families. We have other lives outside of the legislature. We have careers. So, you try to balance your legislative responsibilities and representation of your constituents with your family and your career. For some of us who are younger, that creates a challenge. I don't think it is healthy for us, for the state, to have a bunch of retirees and multi-millionaires in the legislature. A balanced, diverse perspective is always healthy.

**One of the areas where your philosophy appears to fall into line with some members of the Senate majority party is related to tax policy, specifically broadening the sales tax base while lowering rates.**

I do subscribe to the fiscal policy of a lower rate and a broadening of the base. The problem with that is how far do you lower the rate and how far do you broaden the base? Right now, we are picking winners and losers at the



Sen. Ford prepares for a meeting in July. Photo credit: Jessica Wells

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expense of one business over another, and that is not healthy fiscal policy.

**But you also have expressed concerns about some of the tax policies proposals that come from this legislative session?**

What we are seeing now, this piecemealing of tax policy, is creating business uncertainty. Businesses don't know from one legislative session to the next what is going to happen. Business likes certainty. Business owners want to know, want certainty, so that we can plan and work and grow our businesses.

**One of the key proposals would shift sales tax distributions in the state. As a legislator representing Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, what are your thoughts about that?**

There is a common denominator in places like Mecklenburg and Wake counties. The men and women in these communities, who get up and go to work every day, made a conscious decision at the ballot box to support either the leadership or the revenue initiatives to invest in their communities. They need to be commended for it, not punished. When a community is willing to make an investment into itself, it should be no surprise that people from all over the country, all over the world, are attracted to those communities that have the infrastructure and the services and amenities to support working families. That is one of the biggest things that is being missed in this entire conversation.

**But many rural areas of the state are struggling. What is the solution?**

I think as a legislature, we have to figure out how to position urban and rural North Carolina to be successful. We have a Golden Leaf Fund designed to benefit rural North Carolina. We have a Rural Center. We need to restore funding to them. If there were problems on deliverables, I understand. But you don't throw the baby out with the bath water. [SC](#)



*A former entrepreneur, Sen. Ford uses that experience to work across party lines when representing his district. Photo credit: Jessica Wells*



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