

Marie Johns is Leaving Her Mark on SBA

Written by George E. Curry
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Marie Johns, the retired president of Washington Verizon, was busy managing a consulting firm when she received an unexpected call three years ago from the White House.

“I got a call one day from White House personnel to come in and talk about a position with the administration,” she recounted. “Of course, given the historic nature of President Obama’s ascendancy to the presidency, I was honored to answer that call.”

That call was to become Deputy Administrator of the Small Business Administration, a federal agency that provides small businesses with access to capital, federal contracting as well as training and counseling. The Senate unanimously confirmed her for the post on June 22, 2010.

At the end of May, Johns plans to return to her consulting firm, proud of the record she is leaving behind.

“Coming to the SBA was a natural for me,” she said during a recent interview at her office in Southwest Washington, D.C. “I had been focusing on small business for many years.”

She had been around small businesses all of her life.

“During the 1950’s my grandfather started a small landscaping company in our hometown of Indianapolis,” she said in a Feb.7 note to the SBA staff notifying employees of her intention to

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return to the private sector. “It went on to become one of the first African American-owned businesses to win a state contract in Indianapolis. I saw firsthand how that business not only improved the lives of our family, but also created opportunities for his employees and our community. My grandfather’s entrepreneurial spirit has inspired my work every day at the SBA.”

Johns is proud of her accomplishments at the SBA.

“All across the SBA, we have worked hard to address the needs of underserved communities,” she said in her note to the staff. “We have worked together to improve processes and programs with the goal of making the SBA one of the best places to work in the federal government. We have joined together after countless disasters to assist families and business owners as they rebuild their lives and livelihoods. We have provided businesses the capital, counseling, and contracting they need to fuel economic growth and create jobs. And, together, we have helped restore confidence in the American Dream.”

If the American Dream is going to be realized, it will be partly as a result of growing in global markets.

“About 87 percent of the exporters in the country are small businesses,” she said. “But the majority of them export to one country.” She explained, “Ninety-plus percent of the consumer power in the world is outside of the United States. So, exports have to be part of the growth strategy for small businesses down the road.”

Michael A. Grant, president of the National Bankers Association, credited Johns with restoring trust between the NBA, most of whose members are Black, and the federal agency.

“She actively and aggressively worked to include minority banks in all new programs,” he said. “Instead of merely urging small banks to develop stronger ties to big banks, she made sure that happened. She brought five or six mega-banks to our meeting. She not only set up the meeting, she chaired the meeting herself. She is incredible.”

Harry C. Alford, president of the National Black Chamber of Commerce, is perhaps Johns’

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fiercest critic. He uses another word – “terrible” – to describe her tenure at the SBA.

“She has actually refused to meet with any of our 150 chapters,” he said via email. “Ignoring the largest Black business association in the world is a blueprint for failure. The numbers show it – 1% Black contracting and 1% SBA guaranteed loans to Black business.”

Alford cites the SBA as the source of his figures. However, Johns says the SBA does not separate figures by race, though it hopes to eventually be able to provide a more detailed breakout. She says that over the past four years, SBA has supported more than \$106 billion in lending to more than 193,000 small businesses and entrepreneurs, including two record years of providing more than \$30 billion in loan guarantees.

In addition, she said, her agency has helped small businesses access more than \$286.3 billion in federal contracts – \$32 billion more than the preceding three years. That is more noteworthy because the increased spending with small businesses occurred as overall federal contract spending was decreasing.

She said Black businesses have profited from that activity.

Ron Busby, president of the U.S. Black Chamber, Inc., has worked closely with Johns. He drafted a letter on behalf of his organization, the National Bankers Association, the NAACP, the National Urban League, the National 8(a) Association and other groups urging President Obama to select her to head the SBA following the resignation of Administrator Karen Mills.

“Deputy Administrator Johns is one of the strongest advocates in the federal government for small businesses overall, as well as for small businesses owned by racial and ethnic minorities,” the letter said. It went on to praise her for increasing access to capital, expanding federal contracting with people of color and helping create partnerships with other ethnic business associations.

Johns says she has also sought to build a greater sensitivity to what she calls underserved groups. By her count, she has met with staff in all 10 regions and visited 48 district offices, 41

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states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

Johns said she is pleased that capital is again flowing to small businesses, SBA paperwork has been reduced and that she has aggressively engaged business groups, not waiting for them to come to the SBA for support.

When pressed to cite her greatest accomplishment, Johns said, "I would say leaving a legacy of commitment to the underserved agenda for the SBA and really putting in place programs and initiatives that will carry on."