

MR. VICE PRESIDENT

BY LARRY NAGENGAST

Delaware's Joe Biden is about to become Mr. Vice President and the implications of the change for the First State are already prompting plenty of discussion.

The consensus is that having a Delawarean as vice president is definitely an asset, but the sentiment isn't unanimous.

Both U.S. Rep. Mike Castle and Professor Charles M. Elson, corporate governance expert in the University of Delaware's Alfred Lerner College of Business and Economics, say Biden's departure from his post as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee could hurt if Congress takes up legislation to federalize corporation law or to change standards for jurisdiction in bankruptcy cases. "We always had the stopgap of having Joe there," Castle says. "He was a major force on the Judiciary Committee."

Elson puts it more bluntly: "A senator has a vote. The vice president doesn't."

But the vice president can be the president's right-hand man, and President-elect Barack Obama has made it clear he selected Biden to be his trusted advisor.

"It means our voice will be heard," Gov.-elect Jack Markell says. "It's great for us to have access and the relationship with someone in such an important position."

Adds former Gov. Pete du Pont: "When the First State has real access to the second most important person in the federal government, we should be thankful."

Bob Byrd, longtime political consultant and lobbyist at Wolf Block in Wilmington, believes Biden's closeness to the president will pay off if Delaware's interests are threatened, especially in the corporate law arena. "We don't need the feds to get involved and put restrictions on the things we've been doing for years," he says. "Hopefully, Joe as vice president will be able to help with that."

Ted Kaufman, who has been named to fill Biden's Senate seat, and is a member of the Obama-Biden Transition Team, asserts that Biden "understands better than anyone in Washington the importance of the Delaware judicial system to the country." While it was great to have Biden as a senator, Kaufman says, "it will be even better to have him as vice president."

Indeed, Biden's election has heightened awareness of the state and boosted the morale of its residents, says Fred Sears, executive director of the Delaware Community Foundation. "I traveled to California recently, and friends and just people



Vice President-elect Joseph R. Biden, Jr. waves from a carriage during the Return Day parade in Georgetown, Del. in November. Photo courtesy of The News Journal/Suchat Pederson

I met on the golf course, they now say, 'hey, that's Joe Biden's state.' The pride factor for Delaware is unbelievable."

There may be more tangible payoffs as well.

UD professor of communication and journalist in residence Ralph Begleiter, noting repeated references to Biden's daily commutes while on the campaign trail, believes Delaware could be well positioned if Obama's transportation plans include strengthening Amtrak by adding maintenance or training facilities in the Northeast Corridor.

Joe Pika, UD political science professor, thinks the campaign helped emphasize Delaware's convenient and central mid-Atlantic location. This increased awareness could lead to "more receptivity to Delaware by business and administration officials," he says.

Taking that a step further, Begleiter speculates that if lobbyists or businesspeople approach the vice president with a proposal that "includes a little piece of the pie for Delaware," it will more likely get a favorable review. "I don't want it to sound like pork barrel, because it isn't," he says, "but look what happens to any state when they have people in high places."

Ultimately, Pika says, it can't hurt Delaware to have an advocate and a protector at the president's side.

"If something might hit Delaware unfairly, he'd be willing to step in and go to bat for us," Castle adds. "I'm sure he'll take our calls." ■