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New WMC Chairman Calls for Statesmanship

Jay Smith will openly tell you that he at times can have a cynical view on things. However, a short conversation in the halls of Teel Plastics—a company he purchased with his children in 1999—will leave you about as optimistic as you can be.

A Madison native, Smith finds his optimism rooted in the State of Wisconsin.

After graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1963, Smith began his career with Fordem Company, a family owned packaging business. A few short years later, he was named President of the company and started to focus on medical packaging.

In 1982, after becoming the North American market leader for sterilizable medical packaging, Smith negotiated the sale of Fordem to the British conglomerate DRG PLC—the largest manufacturer of medical packaging outside of America. This created the world's largest international business in the market segment. By the late eighties, he was named President and he and his wife began living overseas, as well as in Madison. However, in 1993, it was time to retire and get back to Wisconsin.

Back in the Badger State—with his family by his side—Smith put another notch on a wildly successful career by acquiring Teel Plastics in Baraboo. Not only has Teel grown dramatically under Smith—including a brand new 150,000 square foot headquarters that was built in 2007—the Baraboo community has flourished in part thanks to the success.



Being a leader in business is just the first part of the story, though.

From 1995 to 2001, Smith served on the UW System Board of Regents, including a two-year stint as President in 2000 and 2001 where he co-chaired Wisconsin's first Economic Summit. "UW, government and the business community need to work together," Smith said in an interview. "It is a necessity"

Bringing together his experience in business and his experience in higher education, Smith sees a bright future for Wisconsin. But, he also sees roadblocks.

"What is the definition of a statesman?" Smith asked somewhat rhetorically when talking about the direction of the state.

He thinks there are too few statesman in government roles anymore, and thinks individuals from both sides of the aisle should be able to come together for the betterment of the state. In his new role as WMC Chairman of the Board, Smith intends to both drive policies that will help move Wisconsin forward and encourage more stately discourse in Madison.

To answer Smith's earlier question, the definition of a statesman is "a

skilled, experienced and respected political leader." There is no question about it, while Smith has never sought political office, he is the definition of a statesman.

The third prong of his biography will be written over the next two years as Smith leads the largest and likely most impactful business association in Wisconsin.

Smith's goals include specifics like solving the state's high workers' compensation medical costs by implementing a fee schedule and supporting individuals for public office that understand the importance of the business community.

Looking more broadly at Wisconsin's future, Smith believes that business must come together with those in higher education and government to help each other grow a more symbiotic relationship. Having led both successful businesses and the UW Board of Regents, Smith wants to ensure a collaborative relationship moving forward.

Last, but certainly not least, Smith is direly concerned with Wisconsin youths' poor understanding of the free market system and their economic literacy. He believes the next generation of workers must have a broad understanding of history and the principles of our founding fathers to ensure success moving forward.

One thing is certain. Smith has high hopes for the next two years. "WMC can have an impact," Smith concluded. "We can do a lot." ■