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A Q&A with Dr. Henry McKoy, a Biden Presidential Appointee

by Jason Parker — August 5, 2022 : 9-12 minutes : 8/5/2022

Henry McKoy, Triangle economist, entrepreneurial leader, and community advocate accepts Presidential appointment

DURHAM – A professor at North Carolina Central University, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an entrepreneurial leader. A community leader in charge of a revitalization effort in a historic neighborhood in downtown Durham. And a former official with the North Carolina Department of Commerce and former appointee of the North Carolina Economic Development Board that [advocates for equity](#) in workforce development.

That's all the same person: Dr. Henry McKoy. And though McKoy's current and past roles read as quite the biography, he's accepted a new one.

Accepting a Presidential appointment, McKoy [added another title](#), and is now the inaugural director of the office of state and community energy programs at the United States Department of Energy.

"I feel honored to be tapped as the Inaugural Director of this new office within the US Department of Energy," McKoy told WRAL TechWire in an interview in early August. "The office will oversee a team doing incredible work on behalf of the President's White House Infrastructure and Climate Team through the Department of Energy."

WRAL TechWire spoke with Dr. McKoy about the role, which requires him to relocate to Washington, D.C., under congressional law requiring that all Presidential appointees reside in the District of Columbia. A lightly edited transcript of that conversation appears below.

An honor to serve

WRAL TechWire (TW): *What can you tell us about this new office and the new position?*

Dr. Henry McKoy (McKoy): The work will be split across five divisions that entail a diverse set of activities and investments aimed at weatherization, innovation, workforce development, special projects, energy efficiency, conservation, block grants, technical assistance, working with public schools, nonprofits, and communities, training, partnerships, operations, and envisioning the future of energy.

The investments and work will happen at the state, local, and community levels to ensure the maximum impact.

The goal of these five divisions is to work in unison and collaboration with one another, as well as our sister offices within the Energy Department.

The resources for investment at our disposal are close to \$10 billion which come from new monies from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, and legacy and ongoing annual appropriations from Congress.

Our roles as an office is to ensure the monies are invested and leveraged for maximum impact in ways that will build out and repair America's infrastructure, do so in ways that reduce climate change and environmental harm, create well-paying jobs, and ensure inclusion of historically disadvantaged communities, populations, and entrepreneurial ecosystems to make sure they benefit greatly from the work – economically, socially, and environmentally. Justice is at the center of the work.

As far as my role, I get the honor and privilege of trying to work with other committed people everyday and lead these efforts.

It's an added honor to get to be the first in this role. My desire is to lay the foundation for how this work can be equitably done for many years to come, even after I am not longer in the leadership position.

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Leading the work

TW: What are the steps that led to this Presidential appointment?

McKoy: This role is a culmination of my experiences and passions. I grew up in an area of material deprivation and significant environmental injustice. I still know many people and have family who suffer the same even today.

So, personally, I recognize that there is much work that remains to be done.

Professionally, I have been a banker, a successful entrepreneur in the green space, served as the Assistant Secretary for the North Carolina Department of Commerce where my team of more than 100 invested billions in community and economic development – and justice, and I was on the state energy policy council in North Carolina.

I have also centered my academic work around inclusive and diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems, impact investing, and justice. Academically I have degrees in business, environmental policy and leadership, and city and regional planning. I have had the chance through other works to collaborate with leaders all across the United States and world.

I spent a lot of time thinking about this opportunity.

I accepted the role because it is an honor to serve your country, but it is also a platform that can do incredible good for people and places – and our planet – that I felt important to do.

Ultimately, I felt like it was an opportunity to try and do wonderful work. I did not want to pass up the opportunity to make a difference when an enormous lever was offered to me.

Critical areas to address – and soon

TW: What have you and your team been charged with, and on what sort of timeline?

McKoy: There are many critical areas within Department of Energy.

Areas that deal with our nuclear work, traditional energy sources, renewable energy sources, science and innovation.

There has to be a place where all of those efforts come together on the ground and in communities. That is, in essence, the charge of my team. It is to take the significant amount of public dollars, in the billions annually, and deploy them in the most impactful ways.

There is a particular focus on being innovative in our approaches to this work of reducing carbon emissions and global warming.

To a certain extent, the timeline is ASAP, but through a thoughtful lens. There are program dollars that have to be spent during an annual appropriations year that runs from October 1st of each year, until September 30th of the following year.

Then there are the BIL monies, passed in November 2021.

Those funds have a timeline that is a bit broader, like investing them over the next four years.

But in reality, climate change and infrastructure are both such critically important topics that we are seeking projects and processes that invest these billions as quick, efficient, and impactful as possible.

On hiring talented workers

TW: What's the talent market like, right now, particularly in this sector? What can you tell us about the roles and responsibilities for the team?

McKoy:

All of DOE is hiring and looking for talent to join the teams charged with addressing climate change. Our new division is a part of that. I think this is certainly a job seekers marketplace right now, with so many job openings available in many sectors.

Still, climate change is an area where many people find passion and purpose in the work, and thus they seek it out. Across DOE we have more than 16,000 applicants for jobs. So, the talent pool is deep and showing up.

My team members will comprise the roles that connect to the program areas that mirror our priorities. Some will be very technical roles. Others will be scientific in nature. While others will be programmatic in nature. We want people with backgrounds and skills from all the different sectors – public, private, and philanthropic. We also want people with operational skills. These are new areas and roles. So, we will be shaping some as we learn what works and what does not.

How important is climate?

TW: How would you describe the relationship between climate and our national economy?

McKoy: The relationship between climate and the national economy is an undeniable one.

We know what damage and harm that climate change can have on communities and every day life.

Because of these critical impacts, it also opens up economic opportunities to find solutions to such a monumental problem.

Like every other time in history, where there are challenges, there are also a need for innovative solutions, entrepreneurs, and businesses.

If we want a prosperous future for the following generations, we have to realize that whatever happens to the climate, happens to the economy.

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On stepping away from Durham, and NC

TW: You'd mentioned that you would be relocating to Washington, D.C. What can you tell us about what accepting this Presidential appointment means for your other roles and your work in North Carolina?

McKoy:

My accepting this role does mean that I have to step away from the other work that I do. However, I feel these efforts are all well positioned to maintain the work, the struggle, the fight – whatever the situation calls for.

The community work that I do is never about me, or centered on me.

Thus, there are always community members that have been engaged in efforts that are just as capable as me of taking the mantle and leading the charger. [Hayti Reborn](#) will continue to fight and win justice for people.

For those who have followed my work in Durham and the Triangle, they realize that a goal of mine was always to help our region become the most economically and socially equitable region in the United States.

I have wanted it to be a beacon and a model for what others can look to for integrating economic growth and equity in a city, region, and even state.

This new role gives me the opportunity to lead such efforts in partnership with leaders all across America. I still hold out hope that this kind of vision will become a hallmark for our region.

I still hold out hope that it can rise to be that model. In the meantime, there are thousands of other communities out there that want their chance to be the leader in this area.

I now lead a team with the money and resources to match those ambitions. I plan to do what I can to make the most impact while I am in a position where I can.