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Guv is pleased so far

He views year one as a success, feels optimistic

By Lisa Riley Roche and Bob Bernick Jr.

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Utah's governor has just called himself a dweeb.

Jon Huntsman Jr.'s somewhat surprising self-assessment came during an interview about his first year in office, when he attempted to pull out a trio of laminated cards from his shirt pocket to show reporters.

"This is terrible. I look like such a dweeb," Huntsman laughed as he fiddled with the cards.

He may be a former U.S. ambassador and the oldest son of one of the state's wealthiest and most philanthropic families, but the governor seems to enjoy making it clear he can poke fun at himself.

Huntsman, 45, described his first year in office as a success while sitting in his cozy private office, decorated with a portrait of the now-defunct Bill and Nada's diner — a favorite hangout when he played in a rock 'n' roll band in his youth — and dominated by a muted television tuned to CNN.

The cards help make his case. During the campaign, he famously carried just one that listed his major goals, including boosting economic development and improving education in the state.

Now, the three cards that he regularly updates are filled with details such as the number of new jobs that have been brought to Utah, his economic development agenda and the "education building blocks" announced as part of his \$9.6 billion budget plan.

There is also a detailed breakdown of his budget, as well as "fingertip facts" about the state's public education system. The average state salary? \$18.33 an hour. The number of students in Utah? 510,682.

"All of the key statistics that it's important for a governor to know about," Huntsman explained.



Gov. Huntsman waves to his family as he stands with wife Mary Kaye after being sworn in Jan. 3, 2005, as Utah's 16th governor.

Jason Olson, Deseret Morning News

Accomplishing his updated list of goals no doubt became easier as the state's tax revenues continued to grow and grow. The budget surplus, combined with projected growth in tax collections, adds up to about \$1 billion.

But don't try to tell Huntsman he got lucky by taking office during an economic upswing.

"I don't think there's such a thing as luck in politics. I think there are cycles . . . but the cycles also come back to bite you," the governor said, claiming he often made his own luck since being sworn in on Jan. 3, 2005.



Gov. Huntsman, center, walks with St. George Mayor Dan McArthur, right, to view flood destruction Jan. 11 in the St. George area.

Scott G. Winterton, Deseret Morning News

Tackling big issues

Many victories the Republican cites from the past 12 months are environmental. There was the state ban on accepting higher-level nuclear waste, labeled B and C, and his firm "No" to the expansion of the state's only nuclear waste disposal facility, Envirocare.

He takes pride, too, in the progress to persuade the federal government to put a stop to another nuclear waste facility in Utah that is being sought by the Skull Valley band of the Goshute Indians on tribal land in Tooele County.

Huntsman is also proud of his role in securing a settlement between the state and environmental

groups and others that sued to stop Legacy Parkway, after a costly legal battle delayed construction on the Davis County commuter route for years.

Overall, the governor "has done a tremendous job of hitting a couple of big issues and sticking with them," said Kirk Jowers, head of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics.

It's the coming year, Jowers said, that will determine how Huntsman rates as a governor. "He's given himself as much potential as he could," Jowers said. "There's been nothing really bad that's happened to him, and he's got a budget surplus and a lot of popularity."

Some battles have yet to be won, or even fought publicly. Huntsman acknowledged he wants to see the state's liquor laws changed to allow private clubs the option of doing away with memberships.

Selling the idea of permitting the state's members-only drinking establishments to become bars is not an easy task, the governor has found. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which had no comment on the issue, has traditionally opposed liquor by the drink.

Huntsman said he remains optimistic — even after talking to LDS leaders about the issue, as well as officials of other faiths, private club owners, and both advocates and opponents of loosening the law.

"No one has said no, and therefore it is a work in progress," he said. "When you look at alcohol reform, that would be the most important area of change . . . although I would tell you that is something that cannot be done in a single year."

The LDS Church, the governor said, has not told him what to do on this or anything else.

"I haven't been directed on any issues," he said. "I've had some very good conversations with the First Presidency, and President (Gordon B.) Hinckley was in my home last week. We talked about — I won't get into the details — some of the issues on my agenda. It was very good."

Lending an ear

Tax reform may well be one of those issues. The LDS Church has already issued a statement calling for Utah taxpayers to continue to be allowed to deduct their charitable contributions on state income tax returns.

Huntsman originally came out with what he called a "fairer, flatter" tax plan that would have eliminated that and other deductions, including for home-mortgage interest and larger families, in order to lower rates.

His plan has since been modified to restore the controversial deductions and is more or less the proposal that the state's Tax Reform Task Force will send to the 2006 Legislature for action.

Huntsman, an active Mormon whose father is a member of the LDS Fifth Quorum of the Seventy for the Utah Salt Lake City area, said he understands he's "elected by all the people" in a state "with lots of religious interests, lots of social and economic interests. I take that charge seriously."

During the interview, Huntsman, whose hair is grayer than it was a year ago, repeatedly talks about himself as "the lobbyist and the voice for those without," something he said came as a surprise. "That's not something I necessarily anticipated coming into the job."

Likely, some of that focus is the result of the advice he's getting from one of his key advisers, community activist Pamela Atkinson. She's already helped guide him to looking at a number of issues affecting low-income Utahns, including the need to raise the minimum wage.

Another member of the informal group the governor relies on for advice is H.E. "Bud" Scruggs, a former GOP strategist and former chief of staff to Republican Gov. Norm Bangerter.

Huntsman is "remarkable. His first instinct is to make the person he's talking to feel comfortable, make them feel important," said Scruggs, now the president of Leucadia Asset



First lady Mary Kaye Huntsman, left, and Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. stand beside children Mary Anne and Gracie Mei at a vigil at Pioneer Park Dec. 21. The vigil was for 42 Utah homeless who died in 2005.

Brian Nicholson, Deseret Morning News

Management Group and member of the board of directors of the Deseret Morning News.

Scruggs said he speaks with Huntsman "regularly but not frequently." He declined to give specifics about what they discuss but said Huntsman "is the complete package" — well-mannered, handsome, smart and "very comfortable, secure, in his own skin."

Scruggs said he has associated with "some wealthy and powerful people — and they have this insecurity that makes them want to demonstrate to you right away that they are more powerful or rich or smart than you are. But quite the contrary with Huntsman."

The governor's advisers also include Utah Jazz owner Larry Miller, who heads up Huntsman's privately funded Utah Policy Partnership that is charged with looking for efficiencies in state government.

A problem surfaced with the partnership when it was learned the consulting firm Huntsman had hired to run it and raise money for his political action committee, Farbman Hopkins & Associates, was also representing Envirocare. The firm no longer has Huntsman as a client.

Other difficulties for Huntsman include how he dismantled the state's economic development department to move that government function into his office — by firing 33 employees. He also drew criticism for replacing the state's citizen-advocate for public utilities.

He did relatively well during his first legislative session as governor, which began shortly after he moved into his Capitol Hill offices. The 2006 Legislature, set to start Jan. 16, will likely be a better indication of his ability to deal with lawmakers.

The two branches of government are already squaring off over the size of tax cut Utahns should receive, with Huntsman at \$60 million and House Republicans calling for \$230 million, and over whether the state should bond for roads or pay cash.

Miller, who sees himself as a sounding board for the governor, said that battle may be the first big test Huntsman faces in office. "He's got a strong vision and a strong will of what he wants to do. . . . It's the stuff of which governors are made to look good or bad," Miller said.

The U.'s Jowers agreed that "this next legislative session is a litmus test. Legislators may have had their way a little bit more last year, but that's to be expected in the governor's first year in office."

Nontraditional politician?

The governor stayed under the radar during much of his first session, preferring to negotiate privately with legislative leaders. It's a strategy that's better for him than holding press conferences, his former chief of staff, Jason Chaffetz, said.

Chaffetz, who ran the governor's campaign, said Huntsman only had a handful of press conferences as a candidate, a pattern he isn't likely to alter anytime soon. "I think he feels more comfortable one-on-one," Chaffetz said.

He describes his former boss as more of a CEO of the state, who spends much of his time

focused on attracting new businesses to the state. "He doesn't have the need to be on television four nights a week," Chaffetz said.

Miller, though, said the governor's reluctance "to be a spinmeister, to go out and ballyhoo the things he's done" could hurt him. "I admire that in him, but it may be politically damaging," Miller said, noting past governors have changed over time, and Huntsman might, too.

Former Gov. Mike Leavitt, for example, "became smoother, more polished and frankly, more political . . . and managed the press differently," Miller said. "I don't know if you learn it in self-defense as you've been governor year after year, if it's a natural evolution, or whatever."

So far, Miller said, Huntsman remains "refreshingly politically naive." The team owner and businessman said he hopes to see the governor "step forward" more — "provided it's still sincere, and it's still him and who he is, because I think who he is, is marvelous."

Huntsman, who served as U.S. ambassador to Singapore and as a U.S. trade representative to Asia and Africa, bristles at the expectation that he has to announce what he's doing through the media.

"I don't stand up and do press conferences like everybody. I don't believe in that. I think that's crass," the governor said. "I'm not a traditional politician in that sense. I work to get things done."

He said his diplomatic background has taught him differently, describing his current job as at the most local of levels. In fact, Huntsman said his work as a trade negotiator was "far more complex than what goes on here," and more rancorous, too.

"I come from a world in which you decide what you want to get done and put it out there on the table — it doesn't need to be with a lot of ruffles and flourishes — and you then build coalitions toward getting it done.

"The results speak for themselves."

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