

TAR HEEL VIEW: Allison the right choice for treasury head

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A former Wilson community leader is reportedly in the mix for a high-profile position in President-elect Donald Trump's administration.

Retired BB&T chairman and CEO John Allison is among five candidates to become U.S. treasury secretary, according to Bloomberg News. Goldman Sachs veteran Steven Mnuchin, who was Trump's finance chairman, is considered the front-runner.

As a seasoned bank executive, Allison has all the bona fides to take on the cabinet-level post. His libertarian outlook, belief in free markets and disdain for inflationary intervention could make him a darling of the GOP's tea party wing.

For three years, Allison served as president of the Cato Institute, a Washington-based think tank that advocates for free markets, limited government, individual liberty and peace. The North Carolina-based John Locke Foundation, which has similar libertarian leanings, praised Allison as a solid choice.

John Bethune, a Barton College business professor who serves as director of Barton's BB&T Center for Free-Enterprise Education, said Allison would be "a bold choice" and would serve as a counterbalance to U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, a progressive leader who has called for greater government oversight of Wall Street.

"They tend to be the antithesis of each other," Bethune said. "I think Elizabeth Warren is very much for government planning and control, much more regulation."

While Allison would favor a hands-off approach to regulating banks, he'd likely take a skeptical view of government bailouts and we think he'd question the conclusion that some financial services companies are simply "too big to fail."

Bethune said Allison would focus on enacting conservative fiscal policy that curbs inflation and reduces the Federal Reserve's outsized importance in the American economy.

We don't expect everyone to agree with Allison's views on deregulation, but as Trump's cabinet will skew conservative, his fellow contenders for the treasury post will be closely clustered along that ideological spectrum. A policy wonk who knows the consumer side of retail banking would be a better choice than a crony capitalist.

Bethune noted that the Treasury Department is often seen as a "revolving door" with Goldman Sachs investment bankers cycling between government posts and Manhattan high-rises. By appointing the former head of a community bank that's grown to national prominence, Trump can start making good on his vow to "drain the swamp."

BB&T is the nation's 14th-largest bank by assets under management with more than \$221 billion, and Allison played a key role in the company's success. He oversaw BB&T's 1994 merger with Southern National Bank and the relocation of corporate headquarters from Wilson to Winston-Salem.

A 1999 Times editorial noted Allison's "aggressive expansion strategy" and said the merger was a net benefit to Wilson — though we lost our claim to housing BB&T's headquarters, the bank's local payroll increased by about 50 percent in the five years following the Southern National acquisition.

John Allison would bring Main Street sensibilities to a position long held by Wall Street tycoons. He's been a pioneer for BB&T and a good community steward for Wilson. We hope the president-elect sees fit to leverage Allison's knowledge and wisdom by appointing him our next treasury secretary.