

Will Vigue run as an independent?

By Douglas Rooks

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Of all the unannounced candidates for governor — a smaller, but still significant group — by far the most intriguing is Peter Vigue.

Vigue, the longtime president of Cianbro, by far the state's largest construction company, would be a candidate distinguished by business credentials — one among several already in the race.

But Vigue stands apart for two reasons. One is that his accomplishments, and his aspirations, are impressive. He is the first non-family member to run the company founded in 1946 by the Cianchette brothers of Pittsfield. And he has taken Cianbro to new heights, both in the scope of its work and the revenues it has produced.

Perhaps most significant for his political aspirations, he launched a re-invention of Maine's manufacturing base in Brewer. On the site of a defunct paper mill, Cianbro has built an innovative factory for producing industrial modules — big, heavy components that are normally built on site.

Vigue's theory is that the construction industry is inherently inefficient because of the difficult site conditions (weather, for instance.) Building big pieces of such projects in a controlled environment should reduce costs and improve quality.

The theory is still being tested, but it's hard to argue that a new plant employing more than 600 Mainers doing work that would normally be located in Texas — the first project is a giant oil refinery expansion — isn't significant. And video of the refinery modules moving on barges down the Penobscot River, once the mainstream of Maine commerce, would make a dynamic political ad.

Vigue is thinking much bigger, however. He has promoted a privately funded, \$2 billion east-west highway that would finally connect Maine directly to major new markets in Canada and the Midwest. He's backing a project to bury new electric and data transmission lines in the median of Interstate 95, avoiding the pitched battles that are bound to ensue from the usual high-tension lines. And he speaks knowledgeably about the need to connect far northern Maine to the rest of the state — this one, presumably, a regular public transportation effort.

How much of this is possible, or practicable, remains to be seen, but Vigue is a dynamic speaker and presenter in a state which sees few candidates with those credentials. He's even mastered the artful non-answer.

After a recent Rotary Club speech in Waterville where he sounded very much as if he could be a candidate, a reporter pressed him. "I don't know what tomorrow will bring," he said. "I know what today will bring."

Not bad — optimistic, but not needlessly evasive.

Yet the real difference between Vigue and other "business" candidates is how he sees the relationship of government and business. For the last three decades, to hear most business leaders tell, state government has been the lead weight on businesses' backs.



Reduce the tax burden and regulations, and the state will flourish again, they say. The argument is economically dubious — there are prosperous state with high and low tax burdens, and declining states in both conditions — but, to Vigue, it is beside the point.

The important thing, he says, is not whether health care costs or electricity rates are too high, but what we plan to do about it — both as leaders and as individuals. He says that business leaders must take responsibility for their companies and their employees, and not wait for someone else to take care of problems.

That's a bracing message in a state that seems stuck for ways to get its economy growing. Combined with his business accomplishments, this sets him apart.

If Vigue does run, it likely will be as an independent. Though a lifelong Democrat, Vigue would have a tough time in a primary that now includes both Steve Rowe and Libby Mitchell. And it is to the plurality of voters who are not enrolled in any party that Vigue would make his strongest appeal.

So does he or doesn't he? It might come down to his assessment of what advances his aims. Does the east-west, and north-south highways, and the new electric and communication grid, have a better chance with a business leader in the governor's office, or by staying outside?

Winning the race as an independent requires cornering the market on the unenrolled, as Angus King and Jim Longley did in their successful bids. That's the only way to best the established parties' nominees. But Vigue is one of the few who could conceivably do it, which is why his decision is being followed with more than usual interest.

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