

An Opinion: Part-Time Department Heads Are a Good Solution-- Right Now

By Scott Laird

Vernonia is currently in the process of hiring a new permanent Police Chief and Public Works Director. Previous City Administrator Jim Johnson suggested that the City Council look for part-time employees to fill these two critical staff positions, and they agreed. The thought behind this strategy was to find retired people not ready to end their work careers, that could bring a strong background and years of experience and knowledge to these two positions, while saving the city the payroll expense of full-time employees and full benefits. I like this on a trial basis as a temporary solution.

The city has been without a Public Works Director for a number of years. Jeff Burch, the department Foreman, stepped up and has filled the role of Director for a long stretch. He was responsible for helping direct the city through the flood of 2007 and the recovery. Burch has done a fine job given the circumstances, and is to be commended for the effort and sacrifices he has made on behalf of the city and the community. But it's time we got ourselves a permanent Director, someone with administrative experience and the background to run a Public Works department, and let Burch go back to being the Foreman, a job he does very well-- especially given the potential for some major Public Works projects for the city in the near future. There is only room in the budget right now for a part-time Director, and Burch's experience can help smooth this transition. I think Vernonia can make this work.

The Police Chief is a more complicated story. By hiring a part-time Chief, the city frees up funds to hire another full-time police officer, an officer who will be in the community, patrolling and doing police work full-time. The Chief would mostly be responsible for administrative duties, and available to hit the street in the event of a major situation or emergency. A new position of Police Captain would most likely be created to oversee day-to-day operations on the

street.

One argument that I've heard against this strategy is that we need a Police Chief who lives in this community. Someone who knows the ins and outs of what is happening here. Someone who will get to know the people and the players and the personalities. Under the current plan, a part-time Chief would not be required to live in Vernonia. This is similar to the discussion I started last month-- should we encourage all our police officers to live here in town?

As far as the Chief's position is concerned, I think the benefits of having a fourth full-time patrol officer on staff outweigh having a non-resident Chief. As you may remember, one of the reasons our last full-time Chief, Mat Workman, gave for leaving Vernonia was that he was often called out at all hours because of manpower shortages. The administrative and on-call work load took its toll, and he went looking for another job in a larger department. And besides, the new Captain will be the Chief's eyes and ears in the community. More feet on the street and experience in the office seems like a good balance.

Which brings up another point, and I'm going to digress here a bit. Many people in the community are assuming that current Interim Chief Mike Kay will be promoted from his Sergeant's position into that new Captain's role, once a new Chief is hired. That would give a new Chief someone familiar with the community in a top role in the department. But let's look at a different scenario. New City Administrator Bob Young, with just over a month on the job, is a virtual newcomer to this community. The new part-time Chief is almost assuredly going to come from outside of town. What if that new Chief, who will be given the power to make their own hire for Captain, decides to bring along someone they are familiar with, someone they have worked with before? Someone not familiar with Vernonia. Would it be a problem if our top two police positions, plus their boss, the City Administrator, were all basically newcomers to Vernonia?

Personally, I'm not worried about Bob Young. After a month on the job, he seems like a smart, no-nonsense, and very capable administrator. He seems invested in the community and is easy to get along with and a genuinely good guy. He also comes from a city that experienced a lot of growth, change and controversy. I think he will do just fine here. But of course, it's only been a month and time will tell how our new administrator fares.

One of Bob Young's first tests is who he chooses to hire to fill the roles of Public Works Director and Police Chief. New staff hires for Department heads are almost always a crap shoot, especially when hiring from outside the community. You can do extensive interviews and background checks, but in the end, you never really know what you're getting until the person is on the job. And, as Vernonia has proven in the past, even when you have experience with an employee, promotions don't always work out. It's a tricky business, hiring people to run your city.

Interim City Administrator Jim Johnson used a very thorough and patient approach when he guided City Council through the process of hiring Young as permanent Administrator. I hope Young takes the same approach and tries to find the right people for the positions he is looking to fill.

With the right choices to fill those positions, this community could benefit greatly from someone with experience, knowledge and know-how, at a fraction of the cost for full-time employees. And we already have experienced staff members on board to help our new staff find their way around.

Next, how about a part-time Director for the Vernonia Community Learning Center, which is currently being run almost exclusively by volunteers?

It is certainly a time of big change in Vernonia, and our staff at City Hall is no exception. It will be interesting to watch this process, and the decisions that are made.

Real or Not? A Plea for Caution...

By Bob Young, Vernonia City Administrator

Last week, two officers interrupted my meeting. The look on their faces told me this was important. They held a .357 Magnum pistol with belt and holster, a 24" machete, and two dagger knives. They had just apprehended two juveniles with these weapons. Had the young man with the pistol raised the gun or aimed it at the officer, he would have been shot, and most likely killed. No, the gun was not real, but I did not know that, and neither did the officers as they apprehended him in our City park.

This is a serious concern to law enforcement across our country. A number of people, juveniles as well as adults, have been killed when it appeared they had a lethal firearm which threatened the life of an officer. The same goes for citizens with concealed weapons permits. Can we blame them for protecting themselves from what looks to be a lethal firearm?

No matter how you approach it, it is a scary thing to apprehend

someone who is armed, whether it is a gun or knife. Both are lethal. "Replica firearms" being produced today cannot be differentiated from real weapons by an officer in the middle of an encounter. That gun, whether real or not, if used in a threatening way, will force the officer to shoot to protect his life or the life of a citizen. It is a horrible thing for an officer to have to shoot someone, even in self-defense. It is even more traumatic when they find out the weapon was not a real firearm.

Guns known as "airsoft" weapons abound today, and they are identical to the genuine weapon. These "replica firearms" have been used to terrorize victims and compromise the safety of the public. In many cases, there has been a regrettable need for police officers to resort to the use of deadly force in situations where they believe these replica firearms to be authentic. There is a concern among police that such use of deadly force will result in the preventable tragedies associated with persons who brandish replica firearms for the

purpose of enticing police into shooting them. But enticed or not, if you brandish a weapon at an officer, you are most likely going to be shot.

The community has been concerned about the use of force, and in particular, tasers, by our police department. Though this is a valid concern, I am far more concerned today about the use of these "replica weapons" and the impact on our officers who are seeking to do their best to protect the citizens of our community.

Parents, please do not allow your children to play, in public, with these guns. I know there are situations and games where these guns are used in a safe manner. But when brandished in public, they can only cause trouble, and perhaps death.

As your City Administrator, I really do not want a tragedy to occur needlessly because someone raised a "replica" weapon towards an officer, or a private person with a concealed weapons permit.

Readers lend their voices...

To the Editor:

What would Vernonia look like without schools?

Families would move out, and as a result property values would go down. There would be no sporting events, which are such a popular entertainment event for our community. Due to lack of population, the health clinic would close, and our market would likely be gone, along with other businesses we depend on every day.

We can have a beautiful new school that would attract new families to our community. Of course, grant providers need to see community participation in projects before they dispense any money. That is why it is so important to pass our school bond measure--we need that grant money!

We realize that times are tough right now for everyone, but we can tighten our belts and do what's right to keep our beautiful community alive and vital.

We urge everyone to attend the Town Hall meetings to ask questions and learn more about the plans for new schools, and the school bond we must pass. A Town Hall meeting is planned for sometime in August, please watch for the date.

The Vernonia Health Center Board is committed to providing health care to our community. Passing the school bond issue is vital to that commitment.

Let's work together to keep what we are blessed to have.

Vernonia Health Center Board of Directors
Carolyn Keasey, Chairman
Barbara Irvin Marie Krahn
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To the Editor

Thanks to the Vernonia Community Garden Project and thanks for the raffle ticket I won. what a great job you guys did. The yard has never looked better. Where do I buy the next ticket? Thanks to Nikki and Zachary Larke, Kelli and Ben Shulte, Mark Lemay, Jeana Gump, Marilyn, Abigail and Hannah Nicks. Thanks Gang!

Ann Mitchell
Vernonia

To the Editor

A big thank you to everyone who has supported the Vernonia Senior Center Plant and Garden Sale. Your donations of plants, financial donations, volunteer support and prayers are very much appreciated. We thank you for partnership as we continue to grow.

Gratefully,
Romanna Manusor
Vernonia Senior Center
Project Chairperson

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SATURDAY
August 15th



TEXAS HOLD 'EM TOURNAMENT

AT THE BUCKHORN RESTAURANT

Registration at 5:30pm, Tournament play starts at 6pm
50% of fees go to Local Charities.

\$40 buy-in with \$20 re-buy. 35 Player Limit - Sign-up Now!

To register or for more information contact:
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