

An Opinion: The Revolving Door Goes 'Round and 'Round

By Scott Laird

The revolving door that is Vernonia City Hall is back in action and may or may not see more activity in the next few months.

In November, Vernonians will go to the polls and have a chance to possibly replace three of five positions on our City Council. The fact that eight people have put themselves forward as candidates for two City Council positions and three people have elected to run against current Mayor Sally Harrison, is, I think, a clear indication that the citizens in this community are not happy with the performance of the current City Council. This community is in the midst of profound and catalytic change, with immense problems and issues standing in its way. This is a critical time in the future of this community and strong leadership is needed.

The poor performance and sudden resignation of former City Administrator Bob Young was an indication of what has been wrong with the Vernonia City Council-- lack of engagement and oversight. The inability of Council to monitor and hold Young accountable for his performance resulted in Young accomplishing almost nothing in his twelve months on the job. We need a strong, thoughtful, hands-on Council that understands their role in city government-- setting policy and making sure the City Administrator is carrying out that policy.

Because I attend almost every City Council meeting, I know that only about half of the twelve candidates that will appear on the ballot that arrives in October regularly attend Council meetings or are actively serving city government in some way. That's not to say that qualified and capable candidates who aren't engaged in City functions aren't in the mix. My hope is that all the candidates are doing their homework, developing a working understanding of the current budget and its deficiencies, a working understanding of the vast number projects that the City has undertaken or is moving towards, and the numerous issues that surround current staffing shortfalls. Any citizen elected to serve on this Council needs to be prepared to hit the ground running. There is a lot of work to do and it will require a Council that is ready to roll up its sleeves, pay attention to details and make hard decisions.

That being said, this election also requires that the citizens who will be choosing their representatives on City Council also need to do their homework and make informed choices when voting. Vernonia's Voice will be sending out questionnaires to each candidate and publish their responses in our October 12, 2010 issue. In addition, on October 5, 2010, Vernonia's Voice will host a "Meet the Candidates" forum where citizens will have a chance to hear the candidates answer questions about themselves and the Vernonia city government. This will be a great opportunity for voters to better inform themselves about their choices and better understand the qualifications and viewpoints of those running for office-- I hope as many of you as possible will join me at the Vernonia Scout Cabin at 7:00 P.M. for this informative evening.

At the September 7, 2010, City Council meeting, City Administrator Interim Pro Tem Bill Haack presented the Council with four options for going through the process of hiring a permanent City Administrator. In my mind, they really only have one choice-- find a way to keep Bill Haack on the job.

Since the Flood of 2007, Vernonia City Hall has had five City Administrators: Dick Kline, Aldie Howard, Jim Johnson, Bob Young, and currently Bill Haack. Haack came gift-wrapped to the city through Columbia Pacific Economic Development District (ColPac) where he has been under contract assisting Columbia County, and mainly Vernonia, with economic recovery since almost immediately after the December 3, 2007 flood. The City entered into a personal services contract with ColPac in June allowing Haack to fill the role of City Administrator while still technically under the employment of ColPac.

Haack's contract with ColPac expires in December of this year, meaning the city needs to consider how to fill the position that Haack has taken over since

Bob Young's ignominious resignation in June of this year. As Haack presented to Council on September 7th, they have a number of options in front of them. They can hire the League of Oregon Cities (LOC) to assist them with a search for the best possible candidates and then hire the best choice, which will cost the city between \$8,000 and \$10,000. They can directly appoint someone to the position. They can go through a Confirmation Process that leads to a final selection-- basically having Haack go through as extensive an interview process as Council deems necessary. Or they can negotiate to extend the personal services contract with ColPac and delay making a permanent hire until a later time.

Three of the options presented include retaining Bill Haack as City Administrator, and that to me is what needs to happen.

The city is limited by fiscal constraints as to whom they will be able to hire and how much they can afford to pay someone to work-- they have only budgeted for a half-time City administrator after January 1, 2011. An employee who works more than 600 hours triggers the need to pay PERS benefits, something the city would like to avoid given its tight finances. The options available to Council are very limited, indeed.

Hiring the LOC to help with the process does give the city the opportunity to interview other possible choices and, according to the LOC, the current pool of potential candidates who are retired and willing to work part time is fairly deep. At the September 7th meeting, Council chose to forego this option at this time.

There are a number of reasons why I agree with this decision by the Council. The money would be better spent compensating current staff or helping fill empty positions at City Hall. A candidate who would come through this process would most likely be an unknown entity in Vernonia-- look what happened when we hired Bob Young using this same process. Haack would be included in that interview process and we could go through the entire process and spend the money only to decide the best candidate is already sitting in the office he's interviewing for.

And Haack is an excellent candidate. Bill Haack has been working in Vernonia for the last two and a half years. He is familiar with the landscape here. He is familiar with the scope of current projects that the city has in progress or is considering undertaking. He is familiar with and seems to have the respect of, and a good working relationship with, current city staff. He is smart enough to know and admit when he doesn't know something, and smart enough to obtain the knowledge he needs to do the job. He understands the strengths and weaknesses of the current City Council and current city staff. He has shown good follow through and does a great job informing Council of the work he is doing. And, most importantly, he wants to be here.

Haack has experience managing large construction projects. He also has experience obtaining and managing large federal and state grant funds. He sat through the City budget process this past year and understands the current financial situation. He has been obtaining valuable experience overseeing the Police Department since Chief Frank Grace resigned on August 31, as well as public works experience in the absence of a Public Works Director in Vernonia. He has served on the Beaverton Planning Commission so he has a working knowledge of planning concepts and requirements.

Haack is obviously committed to this community. After observing all the missteps, and inefficiencies of the past few years from a front row seat, and uncovering even more issues to contend with as the acting City Administrator, Haack is still interested in working for and serving this community.

No, Haack doesn't have previous experience working as a City Administrator, except for his appointment here as Interim. But he brings something much more valuable to the table-- experience working in Vernonia. And at this critical juncture that is much

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Publisher and Managing Editor
Scott Laird
503-367-0098
scott@vernoniasvoice.com

Copy Editor

Dennis Nicks

Photography

Scott Laird

Shannon Romtvedt

Kris Stuart

Contributors

Nancy Burch

Jessica Jensen Jones

Shannon Romtvedt

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more important.

The possibility of extending the personal services contract with ColPac would allow the City Council time to monitor the city budget and develop a plan for the next fiscal year, hopefully making more money available to hire someone. Appointing Haack also makes sense-- he's been doing a good job so far and wants the job. Going through a confirmation process allows the Council to cover themselves and show they have done their due diligence. These are all good options as far as I'm concerned. Whichever option they choose, the Vernonia City Council needs to get this decision right. They need to decide to retain Bill Haack.

August 31 was officially the end of the of the Frank Grace era as the Vernonia Chief of Police.

Whenever I'm about to say something negative about someone, I always try to find something positive to say first. So here it goes-- on the surface, Frank Grace was a nice man.

That being said, the effects of Grace's one year on the job here in Vernonia could be felt for years to come. Grace showed fiscal irresponsibility, spending money the city couldn't afford on a security system for City Hall and committing the city to a five-year lease on a brand new SUV-- a type of vehicle the city could have procured for much less money.

When Grace refused to enforce the no alcohol policy on school grounds during this year's Friendship Jamboree, he did serious damage to the relationship between the School District and the group that organizes the Softball Tournament and uses those grounds. The one task he was assigned to complete-- revising the City Emergency Plan took him the entire time he was here. His twice-a-month reports to City Council were filled with useless information and were a waste of paper, time and effort. We still don't know all the details of the damage Frank Grace did while he was here in Vernonia.

Yes, Grace was being managed by Bob Young, whose failures as City Administrator are becoming more self-evident with each passing day, and Young was being managed (or not) by the Vernonia City Council, so blame for Grace's performance can be spread around. But in the end, Grace's decisions were mostly of his own choosing.

No, City Council didn't give Grace a warm farewell when he left last month. No, they didn't give him a smile and a friendly handshake. They handed him his hat and showed him the door.