

# An Opinion: Change Means Paying Attention to the Details

By Scott Laird

First of all, I would like to say congratulations to Josette Mitchell, Willow Burch and Marilyn Nicks on their recent elections as our new Mayor and City Councilors.

In Vernonia the City Council is comprised of the Mayor, who is the official head of the City and presides over all Council meetings, and four Council members. All five are collectively referred to as the "City Council." Each Council official is elected "at large" by the public to represent all Vernonia residents.

The five-member City Council is the legislative and policy making body for the City, charged with providing overall leadership by enacting laws and allocating City resources for programs, services, and activities. A big job, especially in the City of Vernonia in 2010.

It was clear from the election results, when all three incumbents were replaced, that the citizens of Vernonia were looking for change in their leadership.

As these three new members get ready to join sitting members Randy Parrow and Kevin Hudson in January, 2011, it is also clear that Interim City Administrator Bill Haack will have his hands full continuing to try to move this city forward.

Haack has already begun to plan an orientation strategy for the new members, and is planning expanded training sessions for all Council members. He has also stated his intention to invite the incoming members of the Council to attend any Study Sessions that Council holds between now and January, allowing them to give input in discussions, even though they would not have any voting rights.

More training, more study sessions and more information about how a Council should be run is crucial right now--for both the newly elected members and the sitting members. Over the past few years City Council meetings have often turned into free-for-alls and wandered away from the work at hand. The pass through of five City Administrators in the last three years has not helped in establishing realistic expectations, roles and a solid framework for governing. The Citizens voted for change and I think getting back to basics is a good place to start.

Haack, in the few months he has been on the job, has been reviewing City policies and procedures, and how the city does its daily business. In the course of his work he has found numerous areas where oversight has been lackadaisical, and where improvement is needed. He has been working to bring these areas to the attention of the City Council.

In my opinion Haack is doing just what Vernonia needs right now--giving Council direction and advice, competently framing and leading the discussions that need to take place, offering understandable explanations about issues, following through on projects, planning for the future, and proposing workable solutions.

At a recent Council meeting Haack noted that no official reviews of City employees has happened for the last few years. City employees regularly receive raises, yet no review process to assess their performance is happening. This is just one example of an item Haack has unearthed that needs to be addressed.

Another example happened late on the afternoon of Friday, October 29th. Haack was made aware that the lease agreement between the City and Vernonia Police Sergeant Mike Kay for use of K-9 Officer "Krueger" had apparently lapsed on June 30th, 2010. Interim Police Chief Mike Conner was out of town and unavailable to sort out the paperwork issue, and the City currently doesn't have legal representation under contract. Haack made the decision to removed Krueger from duty until the contract could be straightened out in order to protect the City from potential liability issues.

At the November 1, 2010 City Council meeting, Councilor Kevin Hudson asked that this issue be added to the agenda and asked for an explanation. It was clear Hudson was upset about the issue. It is also well known that Hudson has long been involved with the Vernonia Police K-9 program.

A number of citizens spoke during topics

from the floor in favor of returning Krueger to duty immediately. In the discussion that ensued concerning the K-9 issue, as well as during several other items on the agenda, it was clearly obvious, not just to me, but to others in the audience, that Councilor Hudson was challenging Haack unfairly about his decisions and was unhappy about Krueger being removed from duty.

A week later Haack and Chief Conner had still not returned Krueger to service, apparently because of ongoing questions about the lease agreement. Apparently Haack had good reason to pull Krueger from service when he did.

I don't believe Bill Haack pulled Krueger from duty because he doesn't think we need a police dog or because he doesn't like Sergeant Mike Kay. He did it because he is looking out for the details of this city. And he ended up being challenged for doing the right thing.

The current City Council, and the newly elected Council should use this situation as an example of how they might start to make change.

This city needs to stop conducting business the way it has in the past--letting things like contracts, lease agreements and performance reviews slide. When problems have come up in the past, we have often said, "...yes, go ahead--we'll straighten out the details later." Only we never get back to the details. The city finds itself in many of its current situations because we haven't paid attention to the details.

We are on the verge of huge change in this city. Millions of dollars in aid, grants and assistance have already arrived and are helping our citizens--with hopefully much more to come. We need to start acting like we can handle the responsibility those millions of dollars assume.

Haack is asking the tough questions and uncovering past mistakes. He is trying to correct the previous way the city has done business and get our city government back on track. It will be a challenging and difficult job.

Yes, it will be painful at times. Yes, he will make decisions that are unpopular.

But the Vernonia City Council better get used to that, because there are probably more hard and unpopular decisions to come.

But, that is the reality of what must happen for serious change to occur. And clearly that is what the citizens of Vernonia want.

Our city leaders need to start dealing with the big issues in front of us--budget constraints, emergency preparedness and planning, ongoing flood recovery, new development of schools and other infrastructure, economic development--to name a few. We need to stop bickering and wasting precious staff time on small items, and get to work on the big issues.

Serving as a City Councilor is a huge responsibility. Governing a city like Vernonia and representing all of our residents is a difficult job.

This is my advise to City Council--let the City Administrator do his job--which is paying attention to the details. It's obvious Haack is doing just that. Yes, ask questions. But also listen to what he is telling you. And don't let personal agendas get in the way.

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