

# An Opinion: New Council Must Find a Way To Work Together

By Scott Laird

Holding public office is a difficult and challenging task. Making decisions that impact the lives of all citizens in a community is a huge responsibility. Being an elected leader takes time, energy, patience and, above all, a level head. Being unbiased and not letting interpersonal relationships affect decision-making is a difficult challenge.

These are all issues that have arisen for the new City Council in Vernonia, a Council that has been on the job (even though they are volunteers) for only one month.

In January, Vernonia saw a major shift in the make-up of our City Council. Three new members, Mayor Josette Mitchell, and Councilors Willow Burch and Marilyn Nicks, were sworn into office, joining sitting members Randy Parrow and Kevin Hudson on the Council.

Right now, the city staff is being overseen by Interim City Administrator Bill Haack, who has been on the job since this past July, and although Haack has a lot of experience serving in City government as a citizen and working with government entities as a project manager, he has never worked as a City Administrator before.

Governing Vernonia in this time and place is no easy task. There has been a high turnover in city staff in recent years and we have more than our share of major projects in development. We are still recovering from the flood of 2007. And now we have an inexperienced City Council and an inexperienced City Administrator.

When the citizens of Vernonia chose to replace a majority of the members of their sitting Council, they made a statement that they were not happy with the way things were being run and I think they were expecting immediate change.

What this community and the Council are finding out after two Council meetings and two workshops (a third Council Meeting was scheduled to take place on February 7) is that change isn't easy and that growing into an effective and productive governing team takes time. What we need to do is allow this Council some time and have patience as they all figure out their roles and responsibilities, get familiar with the details of current projects and issues, and learn the nuances of how a city government functions. It is going to take time for the group as a whole to come together, learn each other's styles, personalities and triggers, and learn to work together as a team.

My guess is, it's going to take 6 months to one year, maybe longer, for the three new members of this Council to get up to speed on all the ongoing work happening in the City-- as Haack likes to call them, "the many moving parts." City Administrator Haack is still learning about his job-- the laws, rules, and ordinances that govern how the city operates-- although he has shown a good understanding of most of the big projects.

Everyone needs to be patient.

The only problem is-- we don't have time to be patient.

Council has scheduled a day of training for themselves on February 12th, led by the League of Oregon Cities (LOC), and believe me when I tell you, that training day cannot arrive soon enough.

Right now, the City Council is trying to figure out what to do about the City Administrator position. Current Interim Haack is working under a contract through ColPac, which expires at the end of June, and Council is wrestling with the decision of whether to offer Haack the position-- either for another year or permanently, or go through a search process that would identify a pool of new candidates to hire from, which could include Haack.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both options. Keeping Haack gives this community some much-needed continuity; some much-needed institutional memory. Haack has managed large projects before, is well respected at the federal, state and county levels, has a wealth of experience writing and managing grants and other government resources, and seems to be well-liked by his staff. He also has been working in the City of Vernonia for three years on Flood Recovery and has a base of knowledge and detail about ongoing work here that is useful. On the other hand, he has never worked as a City Administrator before and has had to learn while on the job, so finding someone else with administrative experience could be a plus for this community.

Council is also moving forward on the Wastewater System upgrade, a possible Brownfields project, transfer of the current school property to the city, and relocation of the Senior Center, Food Bank and Health Clinic, with some deadlines and big decisions on those projects in their near future. There are numerous other projects in the works as well, plus the day-to-day operations of the city.

At two workshops on January 24 and 31, Council spent four hours discussing the City Administrator hire. They had also intended to discuss city goals as part of their agenda-- they never got to the goals.

The Administrator hire decision is huge, as that position has been a revolving door for the last five years and Council is feeling pressure to get this right after the disaster that was previous City Administrator Bob Young's year in office. Part of the hiring discussion revolved around the budget for the next fiscal year and how much funding would be available. The discussion during the workshops also included whether Council should consider hiring a full- or part-time City Administrator, whether to use the LOC to help conduct the search (at a cost of \$6,000) and even some brief discussions about Haack's job performance.

Council needs to weigh the advantages of keeping Haack against the advantages of bringing in someone new. They have a very limited budget, which might lead to a limited pool of candidates willing to take the position. If they are going to search for someone new, they need to start what could be a four-month process very soon, as Haack's contract expires on June 30th.

But so far, they have gotten stuck in the budget numbers, stuck toying with the idea of only hiring a part-time Administrator, and revisiting side issues that have little to do with the decision that is in front of them and that they need to make.

It was clear from the discussions that took place over the last couple of weeks that it is going to take some time for this Council to learn to trust each other and trust their current Administrator. And for the Administrator to learn to trust this Council. That trust has yet to be developed.

It is also clear that this group needs to learn to work together as a team. That, too, has not yet taken place.

It is also clear that this group needs to pull themselves out of the minutiae and look at the big picture-- what is going to be best for Vernonia as a whole. So far, this group has shown no signs of letting small issues, personal feelings and disagreements get in the way of the job at hand.

I get the feeling that this Council feels a responsibility to be extra-vigilant after what happened with former Administrator Young. Young was left alone to do his job and everyone trusted that he knew what he was doing-- until it was too late and a year had slipped by with almost nothing accomplished.

It is a fine line that this Council will have to walk in overseeing the work of their City Administrator-- paying attention to the details and asking questions about progress, yet not micromanaging; they need to let staff handle the day-to-day operations of the city, all while trying to build a working and trusting relationship.

Trust takes time-- something this Council doesn't have a lot of. They have big issues and deadlines which need to be addressed and decided now.

How can things improve? Given the shortage of time before big decisions must be made, one thing everyone involved can work on is their

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interpersonal communication. They need to be talking to each other one-on-one and discussing and attempting to resolve their differences. They need to realize they are all on the same team.

Keep sight of the long-term vision. What is best for Vernonia? What actions will help us be effective and be a better city tomorrow?

And ultimately, each person serving this community needs to take a look in the mirror and ask what they can do to improve the situation.

I don't doubt that each one of our elected officials and staff have the best of intentions and want what is best for Vernonia. They just have some different approaches and ideas about how to get there. But they need to come together. And they need to find a way to do it now. We don't have time to wait.

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