

An Opinion: Choosing a City Administrator is a Big Decision

By Scott Laird

At the February 22, 2011 Vernonia City Council Meeting, three members of the Council voted to begin a search for new candidates for the City Administrator position currently being filled by Interim Bill Haack. (see story on front page).

The search process will take a number of months, and will probably include Haack-- he has said he intends to apply for the position, meaning Council could still hire him. Council has elected to retain the services of the League of Oregon Cities (LOC) to assist them, at a cost of \$6,000. What is good about going through a search process is it allows Council to fully vet all potential candidates, including their current City Administrator, and honestly look the citizens of their community in the eye and say they hired the best person available. Some Council members have expressed that they feel they should trust a search process.

In most normal situations, and if Vernonia were a normal city, I would agree. Looking for the best possible candidate would make sense. But Vernonia is not a normal city and ours is not a normal situation. Three factors should have played a role in Council's decision: 1) Our high recent turnover rate at the City Administrator, and other city staff positions over the last few years. We have had five City Administrators in the last three years and seven in the last seven years. 2) Our community suffered a major natural disaster three years ago and is in the middle of a recovery effort. 3) As part of that recovery effort, we have numerous major projects involving numerous partnerships, either currently under

construction or in the planning stages.

My personal choice for City Administrator would have been to offer Haack a one-year contract, allowing him to continue the work he currently has going, and re-visit the issue next year at this time when this Council has more experience. Most people I have spoken with strongly agree.

I could spend a lot of time discussing why retaining Haack and not going through a search process at this time would have made sense: Haack is smart, well-connected, and competent. He understands managing grants, has shown an ability to learn and comprehend the nuances of city government, and is familiar with the complicated Vernonia landscape. He is well respected on a county, state and federal level as well as locally by the City's partners and engaged citizens. His staff, with whom he works on a daily basis, support him. He is a known entity--his skill-set, strengths, and weaknesses are well-known. He wants to be here and is willing to accept a full-time position at a reduced wage. For me, he is exactly what we need right now.

But Council, at least three of the members, has chosen to go a different route-- the LOC was scheduled to attend a workshop on Monday, March 7th and officially begin the search process.

So, as Council begins looking at candidates and considering changing their City Administrator again, the following are some key issues they need to consider.

Full Time or Part Time?-- As Council debated whether to begin a search, one of the key issues discussed was whether they could afford a full-time

employee or whether they needed to look for someone who would work part time. The job is too big to be done by someone part-time. They have to find room in the budget for a full-time City Administrator. End of story.

Administrator Experience vs. Vernonia Experience-- Ideally, the Council, through its search process, will identify several qualified candidates. Bill Haack has never worked as a City Administrator before; it will be tempting for Council to consider hiring someone who has worked elsewhere in this capacity. What they then need to weigh is the advantages of hiring someone with City Administrator experience against hiring someone familiar with Vernonia and its current issues, problems and projects. This, to me, is the key issue. Haack's familiarity with Vernonia is a huge advantage and must be strongly considered.

Voters Wanted Change-- When Vernonians voted to replace three members of Council, I said it was clear that Vernonians wanted change. To me, that change must come in the form of stability, consistency and continuity at City Hall. In the last year, Vernonia has seen a City Administrator, a Police Chief, their Legal Council and Public Works Director all resign. We continue to lose collective memory every time we replace key department heads and staff. Projects suffer when we don't have consistent leadership inside City Hall. Rita Mae Brown in her book Sudden Death said "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results." We need to stop this insanity.

Process-- All three City Councilors who voted to start a search process said they felt they needed to go through and trust a search process. Two years ago, we went through and trusted a similar search process. In their first round, Council selected a candidate they liked and offered him the position at a \$75,000 salary. The candidate returned with a counter-offer--a much higher salary and a huge buyout clause. Council rejected that offer and started all over again. That's what happened when we trusted the process. The second search brought us Bob Young, who, after less than one year, resigned in disgrace. That's what happened when we trusted the process. We later learned that Young had had similar problems at his previous city--that had not been uncovered during his interviews and hiring. That's what happened when we trusted the process. Hiring someone new is a crapshoot. We know who Bill Haack is.

The Interview and Selection Process-- Since they have chosen to begin a search process, who will be involved? The last time three panels were used-- a

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