

An Opinion: Same Old Song and Dance

By Scott Laird

504 to 84. Those were the official numbers in the recall election for Vernonia City Councilor Kevin Hudson.

83% of the people who voted said they didn't want Kevin Hudson to represent them anymore.

If you divide 504 by 84 it equals exactly 6. By a margin of six to one, voters said they were unhappy with the decisions Hudson has been making on their behalf.

52.6% of registered voters returned their ballots in this election.

Those numbers are facts, and facts don't lie.

Those facts should have sent a clear and concise message to Councilors Willow Burch and Marilyn Nicks--the recall election was not just a reflection on Hudson's performance and decisions, it was a reflection on all three of them. People are paying attention and they are extremely unhappy.

The citizens are sending these Councilors a message.

Is that message getting through? Apparently not. Burch and Nicks showed no intention of changing their tune last week, acting as if the Hudson recall hadn't even taken place. Votes they cast on critical city decisions showed they are still uninterested in listening to the majority, and only intend to do whatever it takes to push forward their personal agenda. They have to be recalled.

Last week Council failed to reach a decision in two important issues facing them--splitting the vote on naming a replacement Councilor for Hudson's vacated seat, and then delaying any decision about hiring a City Administrator after completing a day of interviews with two applicants and reaching no agreement to offer either of them a contract.

No decision was reached on two critical issues and no progress was made to move city business forward. But possibly even worse, even after the Hudson recall, Burch or Nicks showed no remorse for the damage they have caused to our community. Did they admit that they may have misjudged what the citizen expect from them? Did Burch or Nicks appear introspective in any way--that they were re-examining any of their decisions? Did they do anything that might persuade those considering a recall to change their minds? The answer is clearly, No.

The Hudson recall election was an opportunity for all of us to take the pulse of our community, to get a sense of whether the citizens approved or disapproved of the direction our elected

officials have been taking us for the last five months. To me the message was clear.

Personally I have been very outspoken about recent decisions by our City Council. I know if the results of the Hudson election had been reversed, with over 80% of voters expressing approval for Hudson's performance, I would certainly be reconsidering my stance. If the election results had been reversed you would be reading a very different article right now.

Maybe I misunderstood what was really happening? Maybe I misjudged the mood of the community? Maybe I need to rethink my position?

Not Burch and Nicks. They still don't get it. 83% of the people voting to recall Hudson means nothing to them.

When Council met on June 21st to try to select a replacement Councilor for Hudson's seat, they were hoping to make an appointment so the new Councilor could participate in the next two important upcoming business decisions: selection of the permanent City Administrator and the second Due Process Hearing for Mike Kay, scheduled for Monday June 27. Two critical decisions that are being closely watched by the community and have the potential to be controversial.

Here was a chance for Burch and Nicks to show they were willing to work together with the rest of their Council. To show the community that they got the message the voters sent when they recalled Hudson by a 6 to 1 margin. To show they understood that the majority strongly disagree with their previous decisions.

After the interviews and discussion, Councilors Burch and Nicks chose Victoria Peters as their choice to replace Hudson. In my opinion, Peters is someone who potentially has a lot to offer our community, she is just not qualified and lacks the experience to be a City Councilor right now, especially with all the big decisions looming around the corner.

Councilors Randy Parrow and Mayor Josette Mitchell chose Brett Costley, who had previously served on the City Planning Commission and was elected twice to City Council and served for ten years. Costley wasn't even Burch's second choice. Costley, who stepped down as City Councilor last year to devote more time to his family, said in his interview that he had applied at the request of numerous citizens who had asked him to step back up and help.

Loads of city government experience versus no experience? A twice elected official with community backing versus someone who is

virtually unknown? Someone who can hit the ground running versus someone who would need training and time to understand the nuances of how the city functions?

But there we were--at a deadlock. Councilor Parrow asked his colleagues to make a decision that was best for the citizens of Vernonia. Councilors Burch and Nicks refused to back down.

Councilor Burch, who is becoming quite infamous for making outrageous and inflammatory statements in public, once again didn't disappoint, getting off a handful of them, including this zinger and showing her true colors:

"If I change my vote to Brett Costley and we bring him in, then Randy will be happy and you [Mayor Mitchell] will be happy because the majority vote will then bring Bill Haack back and is that what we're all sitting here for--is that the deal?"

Apparently, for Burch, this decision about who to appoint to Council really came down to making sure that previous Interim City Administrator Haack doesn't survive the interview and hiring process. Burch voted to fire Haack in May but then agreed he should be given a fair, impartial and unbiased interview and chance to win back his job. It sounded to me like she had already made up her mind.

Councilor Parrow again offered Nicks a chance to change her vote. Here was her chance to compromise, and work with the rest of the Council. To start the healing she says she wants for our community. Not surprisingly, she declined, staying true to Burch, as she has in every important Council decision she has made so far. Toe the party line, don't vote against the block, keep the agenda moving forward and safe.

So no decision was reached. Council did decide to re-interview Costley and Peters on Friday June 24, but of course they couldn't reach an agreement then either. Burch and Nicks stood their ground and blocked progress. This was after the City Administrator interviews, where not surprisingly the four Councilors could not reach a majority decision as well. On June 24 Councilor Nicks again asked for more time to consider the Council appointment decision, and Council agreed to revisit it again on Monday June 27, the same evening they will consider the Kay case, which will also be heard by only the four Councilors. I wonder if Burch has already made up her mind about that issue as well?

One other thing about Councilor Nicks. For the City Administrator interviews, each Councilor was asked

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to chose a citizen to sit on a panel that would interview the applicants and offer feedback about them. Nicks chose someone from outside the community, who lives in Columbia County, but is not a resident of Vernonia. Someone who doesn't pay city taxes, who won't be directly affected by decisions the City Administrator will make and who doesn't vote for Vernonia City Council. She couldn't find a qualified citizen from within her own constituency?

It looks like nothing has changed. Burch and Nicks are still whistling the same tune. They just don't get it. Apparently the facts of the recall election mean nothing to them.

My position has not changed as well. We still need to recall Burch and Nicks, now more than ever.

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