

An Opinion: It's Complicated. But Not That Complicated

By Scott Laird

First of all I would like to say that I am completely dismayed by the turn local politics has taken in Vernonia. We, as a whole, have lowered ourselves to theft, destruction of property, bickering, name calling, verbal abuse, rumor spreading, and more. Some of these acts have been childish, (did any of you see the anonymous cartoons that were available for a short time in some local business? Or the apparently short lived "Vernonia Truth" website, whose theories citizens poked holes through, even though they were anonymous and didn't provide any way to respond to their accusations?). Some have been down right hurtful, hateful and criminal. All of this goes both ways—both sides have been guilty of poor behavior.

How did we get to this point?

One reason is that we are all extremely passionate about this community. All of us are trying to do what we believe will be best for Vernonia and its citizens. We all take this very seriously and very personally.

Yet, what we really need to do is get back to business, back to being passionate about moving our city forward and hopefully begin to heal the damage.

The issues we are dealing with right now are complex and the reasons we find our community so divided are complicated. As I stated in my last opinion piece, the recall of three City Councilors is about more than Bill Haack and Mike Kay.

And yet when you get down to it, why we are voting on a recall isn't all that complicated. In my opinion it's about City Councilors that have refused to acknowledge and listen to the majority of the voters they were elected to represent. It's about Councilors who have taken bad advice from uninformed people, or people with an agenda, and then made decisions about city business with a bias. It is about City Councilors who have made inaccurate statements while representing the City of Vernonia. It's about City Councilors who have been evasive and were unwilling to compromise. It's about Councilors who were thoroughly inexperienced in the operations of City Management, yet were unwilling to take direction from City staff and legal counsel.

All of those things are unacceptable, in my opinion, from a City Councilor. And now we are having to recall Councilors Burch and Nicks.

From the very beginning, I sensed trouble with this Council. In early February I wrote an Opinion piece that hinted that this Council was already having trouble working with Haack. A month later I wrote about finding ways to "agree to disagree," because we were developing an "Us vs. Them" mentality. A group of concerned citizens began meeting to discuss ways to help—they suggested mediation, along with other ideas. In early April, at the last minute, I pulled a harshly critical Opinion piece, hoping to give this Council some more time.

But what continued to be obvious was that we had inexperienced Councilors who did not understand their role, who were jumping in and forcing change. And dividing our community.

Early on, in the first month or so that she was in office, I had a conversation with Marilyn Nicks in

which I expressed concern that this Council was going to run Bill Haack out of town, making themselves and our entire community look very stupid in the process. We're not trying to run him out of town, was Nick's response. And now look at us.

The citizens who are asking for the recall of Burch and Nicks have done nothing wrong over the last few months. They have exercised their right, under state law, to recall elected officials that they believe are not serving our community's best interests. They have exercised their right to free speech by holding legal demonstrations and posting signs. They have expressed their opinions by appearing before City Council and writing Letters to the Editor. I have reported what has been happening in Council meetings and published my opinions. This is our right. We also can't control what any and all citizens will do with information that is provided to the public. That some people have chosen to resort to ugliness is extremely unfortunate and should not be accepted.

Without taking time here to review all the mistakes that have taken place over the last six months, all you have to do is read the Justifications Statements Burch and Nicks wrote on the ballot that forced the City to hold the current Recall Election to understand what has gone wrong.

Nicks, in her very first sentence, says she hasn't seen or verified the signatures of the citizens that forced the recall--signatures that are verified by the County Elections Official. But once again Nicks appears unwilling to trust staff, this time its County staff, not Vernonia staff. Her statement and belief that Haack withdrew from mediation is also questionable.

Burch, in her Justification Statement, claims a Tort Claim has already been filed against the City due to Bill Haack's actions. First of all, no Tort Claim has been filed—that statement is just not true. And it is extremely inappropriate, and irresponsible for any City representative to comment in any way about the details of legal matters involving the city.

Another brief and recent example—On a public social network Burch stated that I had access to all the same information that Council was reviewing about the Kay investigation. That statement is inaccurate--the public and press was not granted access to the information until after the investigation was complete and Kay had been terminated and was subject to public

records request rules.

We have inexperienced Councilors continually making poor and uninformed choices and statements who have been given the opportunity, but have been unwilling, to take responsibility for their mistakes. Who have insisted on dragging this town through the mud to the bitter end.

From the beginning I thought Council, and the City, would have been best served if they had extended Haack's contract and not disrupted the ongoing City work with a major change. We needed continuity after so many changes over the last seven years. I did not think starting a search process was the best idea.

That being said—if Council is able to locate another candidate, whose experience, demeanor and personality is a good fit, I am open to the idea of considering a change. I want to state this very clearly, here in print--for me this is not about rehiring Bill Haack. I want what is best for Vernonia.

But Council still needs to weigh, when hiring a permanent City Administrator, whether further disruption to city business, by bringing in someone fresh, outweighs bringing back Haack, who now has a history in Vernonia, both positive and negative. Take the personalities out of it—how will the city and its citizens be best served?

As I said before, this isn't all about Haack—it's more complicated than that. Yet so much of what has gone wrong here is about the relationship between Council and Haack-- and what has turned out to be the key issue that ruled so much of that relationship—the issue of the fitness for duty and eventual termination of Police Officer Mike Kay.

Why did Council choose to terminate Haack? What did Haack do wrong?

Again—it's somewhat complicated, but not that complicated. Ignoring some inaccurate statements being circulated about overspending, reserve accounts not being funded, and unsustainable projects, apparently what Haack did was try to resolve a personnel issue that he inherited from the previous administration--an issue that was on his desk when he took the job. An issue which was extremely sticky and posed a liability threat to the city. The timeline I published, starting on page one of this issue, will hopefully give readers a better understanding of just how this issue played out.

For a long time I publicly

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

Contributors

Chip Bubl
Dr. Carol McIntyre
Karen Miller
Diana Peach
Dr. Christopher Scheuerman
Burt Tschache
Don Webb

Photography

Creekside Studios
Scott Laird
Kathy Larsen

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defended Mike Kay--went out of my way to make sure that his side of the story was being told when he was being accused of wrong doing. But eventually the evidence that the city had a problem became overwhelming. Especially when the K9 lease was found to be expired and the certification issues were uncovered.


Haack, by all accounts, is an acquired taste--he is not everyone's cup of tea and his methods are sometimes unorthodox. Not everyone gets him at first. But most people have found him to be effective, his staff have worked well with him, and he is respected in most circles in which he works.

Was Haack perfect in his actions?—no he was not.

With his City Council, and by

continued on page 14

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