

# An Opinion: It was Time for a Change at City Hall

By Scott Laird

On Tuesday December 11, 2013 the Vernonia City Council voted to fire City Administrator Bill Haack. This somewhat surprising news caught most citizens off guard. While some locals greeted the news with open arms, others were shocked by this seemingly sudden decision.

Although unexpected, the dismissal of Haack by the Vernonia City Council was not sudden and was the right move for the City.

Haack's three-and-a-half years as Vernonia City Administrator have certainly been tumultuous. He has been an enigma in many ways, popular and capable, yet often difficult to understand and work with. In the end, it was this difficult-to-work-with component of his persona that led to his falling out with the City Council.

I can't discuss all the details that went into Council's decision to fire Haack, as this is a private personnel issue. All of the discussion by Council took place in several closed Executive Sessions. But it was obvious in recent public meetings that Council was growing unhappy with Haack's administrative style. Trouble was already brewing during the budget process last spring, as Council and Haack grappled over management of tight finances. Haack's manner and communication style were grating on some members of Council. It all came to a head when the Council expressed displeasure with the project management on the Wastewater Upgrade Project and decided it was time for a change of direction at City Hall.

City Administrators are rarely popular figures; their decisions seldom please everyone. They are tasked with implementing policies enacted by elected officials and are held accountable for those policies. They get blamed for much and credited for little, and usually don't last long in any one place. Haack was no different in that regard. His actions often made him a lightning rod, yet, he also clearly moved the City forward on numerous important issues.

But Bill Haack was different than most City Administrators. Haack was brought to Vernonia by Columbia County immediately following the 2007 flood to help with economic recovery and was hired as the temporary City Administrator in June of 2010 because of his intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the City through his familiarity with the major recovery projects in progress. It was hoped that

he would provide some continuity after several City Administrators had passed through that office door in previous years.

Haack was known for his cerebral style and his long and detailed answers to questions. He was seen as quirky by some and difficult by others. But he was also known for his ability to make connections and navigate the bureaucracy of federal, state and county governmental institutions. He made friends in high places, got things done and found ways to bring numerous resources to our community.

During his time as City Administrator he tackled several daunting projects. He participated in the Oregon Solutions process that helped build the new Vernonia Schools and the land swap that made the siting of the new school campus possible. He moved the City forward in planning for a major and required Wastewater Upgrade Project. He has worked with the Vernonia School District on the deconstruction of the old school campus and the planning of the New Spencer Park. He launched a Master Parks Plan process that will guide Parks development in Vernonia for the next generation and he was instrumental in working with State Parks to repurpose grant funds for parks planning and development. He played a key role in initiating the Rose Avenue Project and securing the site for the relocation of the Vernonia Health Clinic, Senior Center and Vernonia Cares Food Bank. He brought a tremendous sense of vision to his position, and always looked at the big picture.

Haack took the permanent position as City Administrator at a severely reduced salary and worked with a staff that has been slowly whittled down over the years. He was handed a huge work load of large projects with limited resources. He should be thanked for all he has done for the City of Vernonia.

He has also been at the center of several contentious issues. He uncovered more problems with the inner working at City Hall than he found solutions for and often struggled with the day-to-day administrative requirements of his position. He has been engaged in a disagreement over a lease with the Vernonia Ridge Riders, a popular community group. He has been associated with the previously mentioned Wastewater Upgrade Project and rate studies for water and sewer usage, which has led to increases in already high city utility rates.

Most notable was his suspension

and accusations against popular, but controversial police officer Mike Kay, which led to Haack's sudden dismissal during a City Council meeting in May of 2011. The outrage over this knee-jerk action by Council led to the subsequent recall of three of the five City Councilors and the rehiring of Haack four months later by a newly formed Council.

Now those same City Councilors who voted to rehire him in 2011 have decided to end their relationship with Haack.

There is a small contingent of people who will always see Haack as a villain because of a few controversial issues he oversaw, and not even the truth, will change those people's minds. In the end, those issues had nothing to do with Haack's dismissal. He was the right man for the job when he was hired, and when he was rehired. Now it is time for change.

So what happens now? The current City Council has been a very hands-on group that asks a lot of questions. They are willing to work hard and spend the time to educate themselves about issues. Mayor Josette Mitchell is familiar and knowledgeable with the day-to-day management and supervision of City Hall after working closely with Haack for the last few years.

This Council has made it a priority to put the citizens first in their decisions and have wrestled with many difficult issues that impact the community. They almost never make a quick decision, and almost always consider all options before moving forward. The decision to fire Bill Haack was not taken lightly, but it was a decision that was necessary and needed.

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