

An Opinion: There Goes Another City Administrator

By Scott Laird

Well, another Vernonia City Administrator has come and gone.

Gian Paolo Mammone was hired in August of 2014. Following a very long, Executive Session meeting on Tuesday, August 11, 2015, which included a formal job evaluation, Council entered into Open Session and voted unanimously to terminate without cause their contract with Mammone.

Mammone was an interesting choice from the beginning for City Administrator of Vernonia. Born in Italy, he came to the U.S. where he studied at Ohio State University. An affable gentleman who developed several close relationships in the community, Mammone smiled, joked and was jovial at times, and seemed to have a real interest in the future of Vernonia.

Several things ended up working against Mammone as he tried to fill the City Administrator position.

From the beginning one noticed a language barrier that ended up being difficult to overcome, especially in public meetings. It was often difficult to understand him when he got excited and began to speak quickly, and he often had trouble understanding and comprehending direction from the Council.

Issues with his management style quickly came to the surface. What was most obvious was the way he would disengage during City Council meetings. He was often caught unaware of the topic of discussion when asked for advice or input. This happened repeatedly and was visibly frustrating to the Council.

He never was fully engaged in the Waste Water Treatment Plant Project, his number one priority

according to the Council, and several deadlines were missed because of his lack of involvement and knowledge of the project. He did not get involved in other priorities as well and often had a hard time following the direction of Council on several key issues. He also didn't appear engaged with most City Committees in a meaningful way and he took a long time to make decisions or take action on important issues.

He had trouble developing any real rapport with his staff. You certainly had to question why City Recorder Joann Glass, after talking about retirement off and on for several years, finally decided to leave after Mammone had only been in charge for several months, and also question when City Planner Carole Connell quit working for the City soon after the start of Mammone's tenure.

Mammone did do some things right. He ingratiated himself with some parts of the community and showed interest in the development and improvement of city parks; he thought Vernonia showed real potential to be a destination. When City Recorder Glass retired, Mammone was able to evaluate the personnel needs of the City and create a new position, which ended up being filled by then Mayor Josette Mitchell. Mitchell resigned as Mayor to become part of city staff as the City Recorder/Assistant to the City Administrator, and also take responsibility for Flood Plain Management. Mammone created a position to make the most use of Mitchell's knowledge and familiarity with current City projects. He also analyzed current staff and hired temporary public works employee James McMahon as Parks Superintendent. On the flip side, a contract renewal with valuable GIS consultant Ben Fousek was bungled and was executed only after

Council insisted it be done.

A visionary in many ways, Mammone often talked about grandiose changes and ideas for improvements. He had many good ideas, although most were beyond the scope of a community with such a tight budget.

Because of Vernonia's recent history with City Administrators, I think it's safe to say that everyone wanted Gian Paolo to work out in the position. By firing Mammone without cause the City will have to pay some type of separation severance, which is money the City could use elsewhere. The decision to cut ties was not one the Council took lightly.

But in the end, Mammone's long range vision and European sensibilities just weren't a good fit for the City of Vernonia at this time. With so many projects needing attention and a small staff to achieve City goals, Council needed a hands-on, involved and detail oriented City Administrator, and those were not Mammone's strengths.

Speaking of Josette Mitchell, it has been no secret that Mitchell was interested in filling the City Administrator position. She was one of three candidates, along with Mammone, who Council chose to interview from among a dozen applicants for the position last summer. She has filled in as Interim City Administrator on two separate occasions. Council has yet to name a replacement for Mammone, or even discuss how they might move forward; Mayor Randy Parrow left on vacation following Mammone's termination and was absent for the August 17 meeting. Council President Kim Tierney is scheduled to miss the September 8 meeting. It looks like any decision about a permanent replacement will be put off until at least September

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21, but it would not be inconceivable to think Mitchell might be included in any future plans.

Two Issues Impact Oregon LNG Project

Opponents of the Oregon LNG Project received both good and bad news which impacts the future development of the project. The proposed project would develop a \$6 billion export shipping terminal near Warrenton, OR and also construct a large natural gas pipeline through Columbia County, passing Vernonia and crossing Rock Creek.

The good news arrived on July 31 when Federal Magistrate Judge John V. Acosta in the U.S. District Court in Portland dismissed Oregon LNG's chal-

lenge to the Army Corp of Engineers' easement on Skipanon Peninsula, a significant setback for project planners. Skipanon Peninsula is the proposed site of the export terminal.

The bad news was the release of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) issued by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) for the project. The review is being roundly criticized by a coalition of groups including fishing, public health, property rights, and conservation organizations.

This long awaited report was a disappointment, but not a surprise to citizens and groups who oppose the project. FERC has a history of approving liquefied natural gas (LNG) developments, including the Bradwood LNG project on the Columbia River, which filed for bankruptcy in 2010.

Vernonians Against LNG, a local group who organized to educate the public about the project and oppose it, were scheduled to hold an informational discussion about the newest develop-

ments in the project on Wednesday, August 19th. The group has already been successful in helping persuade the Vernonia City Council to officially oppose the project.

The FERC's analysis directly addressed local concerns about the pipeline crossing of Rock Creek:

"We received a comment from the City of Vernonia expressing concerns about the pipeline crossing Rock Creek in close proximity to the water source

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