

Gatch leaving office, but uproar persists

Circumstances of T.O. city manager's departure controversial

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Thousand Oaks City Manager Phil Gatch prepares to leave his office this week, after watching the last weeks of his 38-year tenure with the city spiral into accusations and public contention.

Whomever the city chooses to replace him will face a very divided City Council. And the council faces the challenge of finding someone who wants the job.

"With all the things that have been going on, obviously Thousand Oaks' reputation has been tarnished," said Mayor Claudia Bill-de la Pena. "I remain hopeful we will get the best people for this position."

The council voted unanimously to investigate the circumstances of Gatch's resignation letter. Days after he submitted the letter, Bill-de la Pena said Gatch had informed her he was being forced out by Councilman Andy Fox. She called for an investigation of possible violations of open meeting laws.

One week later, council members Fox, Dennis Gillette and Jacqui Irwin voted to accept Gatch's resignation. He will leave his office Friday.

The council appointed Assistant City Manager Scott Mitnick interim city manager and will begin the search for a replacement this month. Irwin said it would be wise for the council to choose with a unanimous vote.

"I'm looking for someone that is well educated and well experienced and has the confidence of all five council members," she said. "And I think the person that is put in there has to be fair to all five and not play favorites, because in the long run, you cannot survive if you are playing favorites."

Irwin said she, Fox and Gillette took no pleasure in the weeks leading up to Gatch's resignation. They cast their votes after about 20 residents expressed their gratitude for Gatch's contributions and berated the three for pressuring him to leave.

A representative from one of the employee unions also appeared, saying he wanted to offer the support of many who worked for Gatch.

Irwin ran for council on a platform that included improving morale at City Hall. She said many employees told her the divisions in the council were causing a talent drain. Gatch's supporters pointed to that platform in their criticism of her decision.

Irwin said she did not make her decision lightly.

"It's only because I'm doing what's best for the city," she said.

Timeline

May 1, 2005

May 8, 1967 -- Phil Gatch is hired by the city of Thousand Oaks as a planning assistant.

June 1970 -- Promoted to planning director.

August 2003 -- Begins tenure as city manager.

March 31, 2005 -- Submits letter of resignation.

April 19 -- Council votes unanimously to seek an investigation into itself for possible violations of open meeting laws concerning Gatch's resignation letter. In a separate vote, the council turns down a motion to investigate possible violations of city rules.

April 26 -- Council votes 3-2 to accept Gatch's resignation.

On the night of the vote, Gatch said the council should have confidence in its city manager. He was proud of his contribution to the community, he said, noting that he set aside open land in nearly 40 percent of the city. He said he wanted to be known for keeping the city's small-town feel intact.

Council confidence necessary

The necessity of keeping the confidence of at least three council members is part of the job description, said Wally Bobkiewicz, city manager of Santa Paula.

"It comes with the territory. City managers all over America are facing the same situation. Sometimes, the exit is not as eloquent as you would like," he said. "That's an occupational health hazard."

The city of Ojai announced last week that the City Council will not renew the contract of City Manager Dan Singer. Singer, a 14-year employee of the city, has held the top administrative position since March 2001.

Nearly two years ago, Ventura's then-city manager Donna Landeros left because of dwindling support among council members. Only four of the seven approved a favorable performance review.

Her severance deal included an agreement that council members and Landeros would refrain from public criticism of each other.

A good city manager executes the priorities of a council, but those who work for a divided council must be alert to every nuance, Bobkiewicz said.

"If there is a division, you have to take all the available evidence, all the clues coming from the community and the council in order to make good direction," he said.

From the start of his job, Gatch faced a council that was not only well-known for its bickering but one that had not agreed on his hire.

Fox dissented and Gillette abstained in the 3-1 vote to hire him in 2003. Councilman Ed Masry, Bill-de la Pena and then-Mayor Bob Wilson voted for him.

Questioning the process

This month, Councilman Andy Fox raised questions about the initial selection process for the city manager. He recommended that the investigation into any possible violation of open meeting laws be extended to that period.

At that time, a citizens committee had selected five finalists to recommend for the city manager position. Gatch was among the five.

Gatch's supporters and detractors said that initial process reflected the political dissension on the council.

Last week, Jeff Alexander, a member of the citizens committee, said he felt the selection process was tilted toward Gatch from the outset. Gatch appeared on the list of top finalists for only three of the five committee members, while other candidates appeared on lists of all five members.

"I suggested to the council that if they wanted to truly pick a qualified individual and eliminate politics from the decision, they should consider only the three unanimous recommendations," Alexander said.

Debbie Gregory, also on the committee, has rallied on behalf of Gatch this month and said the final candidates were chosen by a democratic process. Fox was the one infusing politics into the issue, she said.

Gregory said that in the final phase of the process, Fox sent a memo to union and department heads recommending they ask to weigh in on the process. They did not end up voting for a city manager, but the recommendation was an attempt to thwart the vote, she said.

As the city embarks on its search for Gatch's replacement, both Bill-de la Pena and Irwin agree the next Thousand Oaks city manager needs to be fair and objective.

The problem is that Gatch already had both those qualities, Bill-de la Pena said, adding, "That will not be a job guarantee."