

Interim Management

Oftentimes, the first question facing a city council when a city manager vacancy occurs is what to do in order to assure that the affairs of the city are properly administered until a new city manager is selected and on board. This is the first point at which the temptation to act impulsively must be resisted.

It is possible that there is someone on the staff who has long-term administrative experience in the city, who the city council knows and has worked with, and who is interested in and able to do the job of city manager. If this is the case, then the appropriate next step might be to simply appoint this natural successor to the position.

Even when there is no heir apparent, or at least anyone the city council feels comfortable appointing immediately after the vacancy occurs, it can be tempting to appoint someone just to conclude the situation. It is in this situation where, without strong leadership, someone may prevail by suggesting that a current staff member be appointed, or that the city approach another city manager who may be next door or who impressed a council member at a meeting. This temptation, even if there is pressure to act, should be avoided.

If the city council acts impulsively, it risks weakening its leadership position within the city. By failing to first consider what it is looking for in a new city manager, the city council loses its ability to compare and measure a variety of applicants against its requirements and then subsequently direct and monitor the performance of the new city manager. Equally important, the chances are great that the city council will not be pleased with its choice on a long-term basis, simply because the person's work experience and personal characteristics, while impressive elsewhere, are not necessarily the right combination needed for success in this new situation.

Recruiting and selecting a new city manager can be a very positive, enjoyable, and unifying experience for a city council. It provides an opportunity for the city council, as a group, to think together about objectives and priorities as a basis for determining what they are looking for in a new city manager. It provides an opportunity for the city council to work together in a way that is seldom experienced when considering agenda items at a typical council meeting.

The following steps are important in terms of getting the recruitment off to a good start, and in assuring sound interim management while the recruiting process is underway:

Appoint an interim city manager--It is important to clarify who will be responsible for directing the organization while the new city manager is being recruited. The city council may wish to consult with the outgoing city manager regarding possible staff persons who could fill this role, or they may all agree that they have confidence in a specific staff person. If there is an assistant city manager who may be considered for

the new city manager position, the city council will oftentimes appoint this person so they can observe first-hand how the person handles the job. Other times, the city council may feel more confident with a department head who is clearly not going to be a candidate for the position, but whom they feel is mature, seasoned, respected by fellow employees, and a competent administrator.

In some cases, the city council may not feel there is anyone on staff to whom they can or would want to turn. In this case, it may be possible to retain the services of a recently retired city manager, or a city manager who is presently between jobs or *in transition*. A list of intransition persons can be found on TCMA's website: www.tcma.org.

Regardless of who is appointed, it should be clear to the city organization that the person is in charge, and it should also be clear that the person does not have an inside track to the new city manager position. The city council should make it clear that they realize they can have only one city manager, and that they are going to undertake a comprehensive recruitment to find the best candidate. If the interim manager is ultimately selected, it will only be because that person proves to be the best in relation to other applicants.

Act promptly--News travels fast, and days can seem like weeks if people are anxious about a situation. While the city council should resist acting impulsively in terms of appointing a new city manager, failure to put a plan of action into effect can cause a void that will lead to rumors within the community and pressure to act from various sources. This can be divisive for the council and can result in the kind of impulsive action that should be avoided. The recruitment of a new city manager is an opportunity for the city council and the community, and a specific plan and timetable should be developed by the city council and announced promptly to dispel questions and to emphasize the positive aspects of the situation. If there are circumstances such as an impending recall that might cause the city council to delay the recruitment process, this can be taken into account when establishing the overall plan and timetable. What is important is that the council take control of the situation, and make clear to all concerned the process they will follow in terms of ultimately recruiting and selecting a new city manager. If the established schedule should change for any reason, this should also be communicated to all concerned, particularly applicants for the vacant position.

Carefully consider the way the vacancy is announced--If the vacancy is the result of a retirement or the city manager moving on to a new position, this is understandable and can simply be announced. In fact, it will be helpful during the recruitment because the city will be able to say that there has been great stability in the position, and the only reason it is open is because of the retirement or new job opportunity for the former city manager. The vacancy is an opportunity that doesn't come along very often.

If, on the other hand, the position is vacant because the former city manager was terminated or quit, neither the city nor the former city manager will benefit from a

public quarrel. It is far better for all concerned, even though it may be emotionally difficult, to simply reach a mutual decision and timetable for leaving. From a recruiting standpoint, the image of the city is enhanced, and there is less likelihood that the former city manager will tell potential candidates that it is a bad situation.

Obtain a status report on organization and projects--Even when there is a city manager vacancy, it is not desirable for the city council to immerse itself in the administrative affairs of the city. However, before the city manager leaves, it is important that the city council receive a briefing regarding current organizational problems and the status of important projects. In this way, the city council can better monitor progress on important matters, and also provide direction regarding priorities to the person selected as interim city manager.

Defer key actions where possible--The city must obviously continue to operate during the recruitment period, and the city council and interim management team should do whatever is necessary to be sure that important projects and the delivery of services continue. However, in terms of assuring effective administrative leadership in the future, it is desirable to involve the new city manager in as many important policy decisions as possible. Major policy decisions can impact a variety of considerations about which the council will want the new city manager to deal, and the input of the new city manager is important. Similarly, holding off filling a vacant department head position can be an opportunity for the new city manager to begin building an administrative team, and this opportunity can be used persuasively in terms of peaking the interest of good potential candidates during the recruitment process. As such, it is desirable for the city council to defer key actions where possible until the new city manager is appointed.