

Reassessing City Priorities for a Sustainable Future

The vacant city manager position and the lack of any staffing in the Planning department have created an urgent need for the city council to reconsider the priorities you have set for both the council and the city staff. Recent council meetings have resulted in a long list of initiatives that do not fully reflect the public concerns expressed in surveys and public comments. There is also a critical need for the City Council to be accountable for the prolonged vacancy of the City Manager position and the botched effort to contract with someone to start an executive search.

The approval of a business license for a pizza restaurant that does not comply with the city's Formula Business Ordinance should serve as a wake-up call. Asking the Acting City Manager to also be the Acting Planning Director and the Acting Public works director while she also performs as the city clerk is directly responsible for the oversight. If something as politically high profile as a formula business can be approved what about the less visible activities. What oversight is being provided to critical initiatives like Gravenstein Commons, Canopy construction, fire consolidation, water and sewer operations, and public safety. Mary cannot do everything.

The first responsibility of the city council is to recruit a City Manager. It has been seven months, and the council has still not even selected a recruiting firm. At the November 2 meeting Council voted to "continue" the discussion of selecting a recruiting firm to the "next meeting" while contract language was amended. It is now 4 weeks later and there are 2 meetings and no sign of starting recruitment. Any failure by city staff should include asking for accountability of our elected officials. Who decided recruiting a new city manager was not a priority?

In addition to the council taking responsibility for accelerating the recruitment of a city manager, council needs to reassess the demands it is placing on city staff through the many priorities it established and the new tasks that come at each council meeting. Limited city staff must be stretched thin, trying to balance core responsibilities while planning and dealing with the complex initiatives created by the city council. Issues are beginning to appear.

The Planning department is the poster child. It is not surprising that a business got approved, in conflict with City Ordinances. It has been entirely unstaffed for a while now. Since planning is responsible for affordable housing, they would have been the point on the Woodmark issues if the department were fully staffed. Planning would be the point department on the Gravenstein Homekey project, addressing both the financial risks created by the change in Federal

Government policies and the oversight of construction as Gravenstein Commons is breaking ground. It has been years since the city has had so many new residential construction projects. The Canopy project is well underway. Builders are making decisions, likely with little oversight from the vacant department. Hiring a consultant to do planning tasks overlooks the critical nature of an experienced department director to deal with the nuances of Sebastopol's more unconventional policies.

At the same time there needs to be accountability for the city staff to deliver on critical needs facing the city. In a separate public comment, I point out that the most critical water infrastructure the city has, its water tanks, have not been properly inspected for 15 years. The government standard for inspection is every five years. If the tanks fail residents will have no water pressure. More alarming, the tanks are not secured to the ground in compliance with seismic standards. This is not due to any recent staffing or budget issues. If a decision was made that the risk of an earthquake is low or a tank failure is unlikely so we don't have to meet requirements, that risk assessment should be vetted through proper oversight.

The first priority should be for City Council to recruit a new City Manager. The city council must also take a hard look at the priorities and narrow staff focus. The Acting City Manager should be focused on recruiting, onboarding and training new staff, particularly in the critical Planning Department. Recruiting staff without a permanent city manager is not ideal but, given the glacial pace city council has adopted to recruiting, it is time to get the city properly staffed.

Priorities need to be proper staffing, public safety, infrastructure, proper accounting, and effective management. There should be a moratorium on new non-core initiatives until the city is back to full staffing. Even then the city council needs to be realistic, Sebastopol is not San Francisco, it is a beautiful town of 7,000 residents. who are in danger of losing the city due to its political leadership.