

New city manager brings thoughtful approach to post

DAVID SHOWERS
The Sentinel-Record

David Frasher wants to execute the will of Hot Springs, but the newly minted city manager said he first has to understand what the people want and the circumstances that inform those wishes.

The former homicide detective knows the value of proceeding cautiously until all factors have been considered. Hence the extended listening tour he's planned, an element of the deliberate course he's charted for his first months in office.

"It's important for the city manager to be engaged in the community," said Frasher, who brings 15 years of public administration experience to bear leading small to mid-

sized municipalities in Missouri, Wisconsin and most recently Oregon City, Ore. "The first year is about making relationships in the community. You can't over listen in that first year. It's always important to listen."

He said he wants to hear from the people whom his decisions will affect, a function of the managerial style he characterizes as "participatory."

"I'm going to try to spend my first six months to a year just getting to know the values of the city," Frasher said. "The challenge is to understand the value dynamic and make sure recommendations are consistent with those community values. As soon as you understand the values, you can

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NEW MANAGER: David Frasher, the new Hot Springs city manager, describes his management style as "participatory" during an interview in his first week on the job.

give much better advice.”

Frasher said the city's name-sake thermal springs recommended it to his wife, Gianina. In her home county of Romania, hot springs and spas are central to the culture. Frasher is a born and bred Midwesterner. He grew up on a farm outside Kansas City, Mo., and is a confirmed devotee of the Kansas City Chiefs and reigning world champion Kansas City Royals.

“When my wife and I were here for three or four days during the interview process, she loved Hot Springs,” said Frasher, who, along with Gianina, is the parent of 2-year-old Mila Grace. “Every time we go on vacation, she asks do they have a hot springs.

“I said, ‘Look, the town has a hot springs. In fact, the name of it is Hot Springs.’ So she was automatically interested because of that.”

Frasher said he hopes to help community leaders identify opportunities for consensus.

His initial impressions find the area not wanting for good ideas but lacking in how to advance them, a stumbling block he said new revenue streams could surmount. But he won't have a full picture of the city's finances until the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities analyses he's asked each department to compile are completed at the end of the month.

“We have to be creative on how to pay for some of these things,” he said. “It's not so much basic services, but some of the capital needs. The city doesn't have a property tax. That's a wonderful thing. Most cities can't do that, so that's kind of unusual.”

Frasher said supplying water service outside its corporate limits is the city's most curious policy, one he said has put it at cross purposes with the county and created a class of quasi city residents who receive city services without a say in city affairs.

“That's an anomaly I've never encountered, because city manager 101 says you don't provide urban services unless it's an annexed area,” Frasher said. “But now that horse is out of the barn, so what do you do?”

“Once you start providing those urban services outside the city it gets very, very expensive for everyone, and then the incentive to annex, and the city's ability to manage what happens after that, is very limited. It causes friction and causes people to feel disenfranchised in some ways.”

Frasher said he wants principals on both sides of the issue to realize that the policy was adopted before they were in positions of influence, and that solutions rather than recriminations need to come to the fore.

“I'm sure the people that made the decision thought it was a good one at the time,” he said. “I don't know if they had the same training I did, but if they did, they wouldn't have

done what they did. I definitely want to emphasize that none of the people who are working on this problem right now have very much or anything to do with the initial decision.

“I want to depersonalize all of that friction and look at both entities. All these parties have reasonable arguments to make, but we still have to come together to solve it.”

City managers serve at the pleasure of a municipality's legislative body, an arrangement Frasher said can make the world of public administration a nomadic existence. Unlike elected chief executives, whose job security is determined in two- to four-year cycles, city managers are at-will employees whose fate lies with a handful of personalities that can set them adrift at any time.

“The average service period is about five years,” he said. “Some of that's self imposed. Those of us who want to move up often have to move to a large-

er community to do that. Some of it is the nature of political dynamics. It's not the most harmonious time in our political history right now. Sometimes that percolates into the local government arena.”

While a city manager's charge is to initiate the board of directors' agenda, Frasher said effective public administrators don't assume a posture of perpetual acquiescence.

“I believe to be a good city manager and give the full value you can bring to a community, you have to be willing to put your job at risk sometimes to do what's best for the community,” he said. “You don't relish those times, because sometimes the advice and recommendations you give to people are something you know they don't want to hear but need to hear.”

Frasher said sometimes the vision for a city is unclear or muddled, requiring the city manager to bring the fledgling plans of policymakers into fo-

cus. The retreat he hopes to organize for city leaders next spring could be the venue where those plans assume more definite contours.

“The elected officials and the people who live here, it's up to them to decide what they want to be in the future,” he said. “My job is to try and get them there and sometimes my job is to try and get them to figure out what that is by setting up different experiences so they can flesh that out.”



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