

Official adjusts to public glare

RIVERSIDE: The city manager wins council members' praise but some residents are wary.

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By DOUG HABERMAN / The Press-Enterprise

RIVERSIDE - Within weeks after Brad Hudson became city manager of Riverside in June, he did something unusual.

He asked the City Council for guidance on two separate real-estate proposals behind closed doors.

Some residents and council members complained about the backroom discussions that bordered on violating the state's open-meeting law and Hudson stopped the practice.

Hudson said his biggest challenge in working for the city has been that he must consider public sentiment far more than he had to working for Riverside County where, as executive director of the Economic Development Agency, he oversaw projects in unincorporated areas with few politically engaged civic groups.

People in the city are more involved, Hudson said, and he is learning to take that into account.

"He needs to go a little slower sometimes, better understanding the 'retail, close-to-the-customer' realities of city government versus the 'wholesale' nature of county government," Councilman Dom Betro said, "especially when it comes to working with community concerns."

But Hudson is a fast learner, Betro said, and is clearly growing into the job.

Hudson came to the city after 12 years as the Economic Development Agency executive director. In addition to working to lure new business to unincorporated portions of the county, he oversaw the county's job-training programs, airports and the annual county fair in Indio.

Expectations

As he enters his ninth month as city manager, Hudson has put in place a new executive team to carry out the City Council's policies and priorities, reorganized City Hall to make it more effective, begun sprucing up the city by trimming trees and repainting faded curbs, and stayed in constant contact with council members.

Hired especially because of his success at attracting new businesses to the county, he has yet to sign a high-profile deal for the city.

"Some of these things take a couple years to pop out," Hudson said.

Business leaders said they don't expect him to disappoint.

"He is putting the pieces in place" for major economic development efforts, said Ted Weggeland, director of the company that runs the Mission Inn and Riverside Convention Center.

Perhaps the change easiest to discern at City Hall is the way the mayor and some council members talk about Hudson compared to the way they spoke of his predecessor, George Carvalho, who was fired in September 2004.

"He believes in shared governance," Mayor Ron Loveridge said of Hudson. He defined shared governance simply as conversations between Hudson and the elected officials.

Hudson listens to the council "and knows the distinct difference between administration and policy making," Councilman Frank Schiavone said. "There's a clear understanding and respect for each other's role in city government."

Councilman Ed Adkison said Carvalho did not always carry out council decisions, so council members had to "bird dog" him. Not so with Hudson.

"He implements the policies," Adkison said.

Strategies

Hudson has tapped several former county colleagues for key positions, created new management positions such as chief information officer (to oversee information technology) in an effort to make City Hall run more smoothly and set up teams of managers to make sure departments know what other departments are doing.

The idea behind the teams of managers is to avoid awkward situations as occurred with the old Van Buren Drive-in, he said.

In that case, a developer went through the entire planning approval process to build about 200 houses only to have city economic development officials argue that a retail development would make more sense at the location.

The Group, a circle of mostly black leaders in Riverside who monitor city affairs, has told Hudson they are concerned about his hires. He filled some of the highest-ranking positions under him with white men.

"We would like to see more hiring, especially in leadership positions, that's a little more reflective of the community," Chairwoman Jennifer Vaughn-Blakely said.

Hudson said his hires and promotions do represent the city's diversity, which is a natural result of hiring the best people the city can find. The people he has hired and promoted have been a mix of ethnicities and close to an even split on gender.

The forced resignation of Art Alcaraz as human resources director, announced in November, also raised concerns among minority leaders because he was one of the few Latino department heads at City Hall. Alcaraz remains on the city payroll as a consultant until July.

Public Input

Hudson is eager to make things happen, but some residents hope he will remember the public wants its say on what happens in Riverside.

Earlier this year, he decided to cut dead fronds off the lower trunks of Mexican fan palms along Victoria Avenue in the greenbelt, which is against a long-running custom.

The nonprofit group Victoria Avenue Forever, which works to preserve and beautify the avenue, got wind of the plans and contacted city officials.

"They didn't discuss it with us and they didn't want to discuss it with us apparently," Lori Yates, past president, said of the lack of response.

When crews came out on a Saturday to begin the tree trimming, she canceled plans for the day and began frantically trying to reach the mayor and council members to stop the work. She eventually succeeded.

Group members later met with Hudson to express their concerns.

"It gives us a little worry for how it's going to go in the future," Yates said.

But she understands what Hudson can achieve with his quick, decisive style, she said.

"I think the city needs a good bit of that," Yates said.

Eastside activist Christina Duran, the mother of nine children, said Hudson is intelligent and personable but she feels he misled her about funding for a proposed teen center at Bobby Bonds Park.

She remembers him assuring her the money was there at first, but ever since he has been telling her he is looking for it, she said.

"It's very disappointing," Duran said.

Hudson denied telling Duran he had all the money lined up but he said the center is one of his top priorities and could open within six months. Hudson said the city has obtained almost \$1 million of the \$1.75 million needed to get the center running.

Hudson has also come under fire from some citizens over a concealed-weapons permit he obtained from the Police Department. In his application, he said he needs a gun because some individuals, who have made threats against him, have come to City Hall, where he works.

But he would not have the gun available if they did come to his office.

"I don't carry it around," Hudson said. "I keep it in the car." He said he has been followed to his car a few times late at night.

Hudson said a police officer helped him fill out the concealed-weapons permit application and that led to a discrepancy between what the application says and what he actually does in practice.

"I didn't really write a lot of that myself," he said.

Hudson's application revealed a misdemeanor criminal conviction for credit-card forgery in June 1976, when he was 18 years old. The misdemeanor conviction does not disqualify him from obtaining the permit.

Hudson said he played football in high school and once the football season ended his senior year, he was bored, dropped out of school and landed in trouble.

"I didn't get out of the starting blocks too well," he said of his youth.

Lots of people go through rough patches in life and "I have a very personal understanding of that," Hudson said.

He wised up, went to night school, obtained his high school degree, served in the U.S. Air Force as a medic then got his bachelor's degree at Cal State Fresno.

While working as head of the Kings County department in charge of veterans' services and other programs, he obtained a master's degree in public administration from the University of San Francisco.

HUDSON'S HIRES

Riverside City Manager Brad Hudson said city employees he's had direct involvement in hiring reflect the city's diversity.

Community Development Director Scott Barber, white male.

Assistant City Manager Tom De Santis, white male.

Interim Public Works Director Siobhan Foster, white female.

Development Department Senior Project Manager Gregg Griffin, black male.

Senior Management Analyst Leanne Johnson, black female.

Principal Accountant Vanessa Kirks, black female.

Principal Management Analyst Mario Lara, Latino male.

Interim General Services Director Kris Martinez, white female.

Chief Information Office Steve Reneker, white male.

Code Enforcement Manager Mark Salazar, Latino male.

Interim Human Resources Manager Rhonda Strout, white female.

Purchasing Services Manager Arturo Torres, Latino male.

Eastside Coordinator Alex Tortes, Native American male.

Real Property Services Manager Amelia Vailu'u, Latino female.