

News Clips on City Manager Selection Process - 2014-15

3/15/15

Letters to the Editor - Az Star

New manager panel did its job, but few know

Re: the March (12)13 column "Steller: Judge's scolding shows need for change in Tucson."

In Tucson we have a developing brand many of us are proud of, for welcoming immigrants, environmental sustainability and being a good place to start a business. What would you do as city manager to promote this brand? That was one of two questions I wrote as a member of the citizens advisory committee.

I was appointed by councilor Regina Romero to represent Ward 1 on the citizens advisory committee and participated in the city manager interviews on March 11. Within a challenging environment, our city is doing lots right. Our next city manager needs to continue this forward momentum. That fundamentally optimistic perspective characterized the work of this committee, but you wouldn't know it to read some reports.

While some members expressed frustrations with the process, we moved past it to do our job. We identified strengths and weaknesses of the candidates, as instructed by the City Council, and split on which to recommend, but agreed both were qualified. We were asked to represent citizens of Tucson in this process. They deserve a more accurate accounting of our work and our words.

Kelly Fryer
Downtown

3/13/15

Becky Pallack - Az Star

Michael Ortega is the next Tucson city manager, Mayor Jonathan Rothschild announced Friday.

The mayor said he and the City Council voted unanimously in a closed meeting earlier this week to make the job offer to Ortega. He accepted an "agreement in principle," Rothschild said, and the council will officially approve the contract, including Ortega's salary, next month.

Details of the contract, still in the works, will be made public then.

Ortega said he will start work in Tucson in June, after completing the budget process in Cochise County, where he has worked as county administrator for seven years. He announced last year that he would retire this year.

He said he decided to apply for the Tucson city manager job after hearing Rothschild speak at a December event about Tucson's economic development and infrastructure plans.

Tucson has "tremendous potential and I'm excited to be a part of exploring that," Ortega said during

Friday's announcement.

During a citizens advisory committee meeting Wednesday, Ortega described his management style as situational, consultative, collaborative and decisive.

Ortega has an engineering background, and he previously worked as city manager in Douglas and held several positions in the Pima County transportation department. He has a bachelor's degree in civil engineering and a master's degree in business administration, both from the UA.

The previous Tucson city manager, Richard Miranda, retired last year. Martha Durkin is the interim manager.

3/13/15

Dylan Smith - TucsonSentinel.com

Ortega tapped as new Tucson city manager

A Southern Arizona native, Michael Ortega, was named as the next Tucson city manager. The current Cochise County administrator is expected to start work for Tucson in June, Mayor Jonathan Rothschild said Friday.

Ortega met with unanimous approval from the City Council, Rothschild told reporters. The new city appointee accepted an "agreement in principle," which will be voted on in April, the mayor said, declining to release the proposed contract.

Before beginning work for the city, Ortega will see Cochise through its budgeting process, he said.

Martha Durkin, the interim city manager, will handle Tucson's ongoing budget process for this year and is expected to remain with the city, returning to her position as an assistant city manager, Rothschild said.

Ortega said that Tucson has "tremendous potential and I'm excited to be a part of exploring that."

Ortega is a Douglas native, and a graduate of the University of Arizona, where he earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering and an MBA. He previously served as the city manager in Douglas, and held a series of positions in the Pima County Department of Transportation.

He said it was a "family decision" to make a long-term commitment to living in Tucson.

The incoming city manager said he was "impressed with what the mayor said about economic development and infrastructure needs in Tucson" at a December meeting, which helped him determine he would "throw my hat in the ring" and apply for the post.

The last time the city hired a new city manager, in May 2012, a national search was conducted but the job went to interim manager Richard Miranda, who had moved up in the municipal hierarchy to take the place of fired former manager Mike Letcher the previous September. Miranda announced his retirement last July.

When the Council laid out its process for choosing a new manager they exempted Durkin from consideration, saying it would encourage a wider pool of quality candidates to apply if it wasn't thought that someone had the inside track.

Ortega brushed off concerns expressed by many about the transparency of the hiring process, calling it "quite frankly ... one of the most open processes" he has seen.

Earlier

Hours of discussion, in public and in secret, led to no final decision Wednesday on who will be Tucson's next city manager. A citizens committee interviewed the two finalists but wasn't overly impressed with either, and the City Council met in private, emerging to instruct the city attorney to "proceed as directed in executive session."

It's likely that means the city is negotiating a deal with a final candidate to be Tucson's top bureaucrat, but Council members and staffers were mum. After spending about three hours in closed-door discussions, the mayor and Council met in public for just seconds to instruct City Attorney Mike Rankin.

Rankin would only say that the hiring process as laid out by the Council is moving ahead, and that no other candidates have been asked to interview for the post.

Rankin said he didn't expect the Council to meet again this week — "If they do, I won't be there," he said — but that an item to allow the Council to vote on a hire might be added to the agenda for next Tuesday's Council meeting.

But City Hall insiders, speaking anonymously so they can keep their jobs, said the city is moving ahead to hammer out a deal with a candidate, despite widespread concerns about the search.

What's a very closely held secret is who that deal is with: Cochise County Administrator Michael Ortega and Sierra Vista Assistant City Manager Mary Jacobs were named as the sole finalists for the job on Tuesday.

One councilmember is said to have called behind closed doors for the entire process to be scrapped and for the city to start over with a new search.

A citizens committee appointed to give input on hiring the manager spent hours Wednesday morning interviewing and reviewing the candidates. They also voiced concerns about the hiring process, bucked the city's outside consultant to run the four-hour meeting as they saw fit, and expressed doubts about the abilities of both finalists. Ultimately, they nearly unanimously said both were qualified, but split 6-5 in favor of Jacobs.

Kelly Fryer, executive director of the YWCA, said she was concerned by a "startling lack of creative solutions proposed" by either Ortega or Jacobs.

"The things they said seemed sort of textbook," she said. "I could have said lots of those things and I shouldn't be the city manager."

"I was very dissatisfied with the lack of vision and lack of clarity," said C.J. Battle, a Raytheon engineer who chairs the Tucson Urban League.

Carol West, a former councilwoman, was chosen to chair the group, which began meeting at 8 a.m. having received little guidance on what their duties were. Some thought they would be interviewing more than two candidates, and many said that the entire hiring process had not been transparent enough. Committee members were asked to submit their interview questions by Friday, days before any candidates had been announced.

As the two candidate's resumes were passed out, search consultant Bob Murray tried to lay out a plan for the meeting, which was attended by 11 of the 14 committee members, two reporters, and three members of the public.

Powerhouse attorney Si Schorr clashed with Murray, suggesting what he said would be a more effective way of tallying the committee's feedback to the Council.

Later, as he pressed the rest of the group to cast a vote to choose a candidate to recommend, Schorr said, "neither Mike nor Mary comes from a jurisdiction of anything comparable in size to Tucson" but "both are qualified."

"These people are essentially Tucsonans," he said. "They have lived a good portion of their lives in Tucson."

"I would have liked to have seen a larger pool of candidates ... those are not the cards that were dealt to us," Schorr said.

Margarita Bernal, a former city judge who sat on the committee, said Ortega was "more specific on costs." Ortega repeatedly referenced having looked over the city's CAFR financial report.

Others, including neighborhood leader Mark Homan, said Jacobs seemed to be a better communicator, and that she expressed a "stronger sense of place" when talking about Tucson.

"Mike knows what his role is; he's thoughtful, he's an engineer," West said. "Who would you rather have a beer with? It's probably Mary," she said, drawing laughs from the group of 11 committee members.

West, who along with Homan was charged with delivering the committee's findings to the Council, said, "I frankly worry that Mary could go out ahead of the Council" due to her enthusiasm.

It's unclear, due to the closed-door nature of the Council's proceedings Wednesday, if the overall concerns of committee members reached the ears of elected leaders.

City Hall insiders said the Council learned that the committee endorsed Jacobs.

Tipsters also said that the team of top-level city executives favored hiring Ortega. The two candidates were also interviewed, in private, by representatives of employee groups Wednesday, who then reported their take to the Council while it met in executive session.

The tea-leaf reading as to which councilmember would back Jacobs and who would pick Ortega for the job is too complex — and speculative — to break down, but the word to the wise is that, whomever the choice is, the Council hopes to have a deal wrapped up sometime Thursday.

Two finalists named Tuesday

The City Council interviewed candidates Tuesday, meeting in private for more than five hours.

They narrowed their choices to Ortega, the Cochise County administrator, and Jacobs, the assistant city manager of Sierra Vista.

The two appeared at a Q&A session Tuesday night, where a search consultant reviewed questions from the public before putting them to the pair of candidates.

Also interviewed in private Tuesday by the Council were Tolleson City Manager Reyes Medrano, Jr. and El Paso Deputy City Manager Jane Shang. Neither was named to the final list.

Tucson officials have refused to release the full list of 48 candidates who were considered (earlier, officials said 44 had applied). City Hall sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that Albert Elias, Tucson's assistant city manager, had thrown his name into the hat but that the Council had declined to interview him for the job.

Sources also said that some candidates had withdrawn their names from consideration, with suggestions that they did not approve of the process used by the city to vet those interested in becoming the top unelected official in Tucson.

About 50 citizens and city staffers attended the two-hour meeting Tuesday, although attendance dwindled as the evening wore on.

Speaking mainly in generalities, both Ortega and Jacobs responded to a series of questions filtered by the city's search consultant. With the finalists only having been announced shortly before the meeting, the questions from the audience were rarely specific to the candidates, instead focusing on broader topics such as process and priorities.

Ortega, a Douglas native who has been the Cochise County administrator for seven years, said he would favor of three-year plan to right Tucson's municipal budget. He said a combination of targeted cuts, one-time revenue boosts and recapitalizing some debt is in order.

While acknowledging that he had not read the entire 248-page document, Ortega repeatedly referred to Plan Tucson, the strategic plan approved by voters in 2013, saying it should guide decision-making.

Interviewed briefly after the public session, Ortega said that despite his having announced his upcoming retirement from his Cochise position, he's eager to "find new challenges."

"I'd like to go where I can serve," he said.

Jacobs repeatedly referenced her Tucson roots. A native, she attended the University of Arizona (as did Ortega). She has been the assistant city manager of Sierra Vista for 15 years.

Tucson should focus on transportation infrastructure and attracting tourists, she said.

"You don't get a chance to work for your hometown very often in my line of work," she said after the meeting. "I'd love to be working in Tucson."

Both potential city CEOs pointed to the state of Tucson's roads, with Ortega drawing a broad laugh from attendees with a mention of driving down Grant Road to get to the meeting.

Despite being pressed to release the full list of candidates under Arizona's public records law, city officials have declined. The city hired an outside consultant, Bob Murray & Associates of Roseville, Calif., to conduct a national search for candidates.

That consultant reviewed the initial pool of applicants, forwarding 12 candidates to the Council. Of those, six were invited to interviews. Two declined, and the Council interviewed the remaining four candidates on Tuesday.

3/12/15

Tim Steller - Az Star

A citizens advisory committee, picked by the City Council in October to help vet the finalists, got to meet for its one and only time on Wednesday morning. Its first order of business was to lambaste the handling of its own committee by the city and its consultant, Bob Murray.

Murray told the committee, which was called together with relatively late notice, that its responsibility was strictly to tell the council what it thought were the two finalists' pluses and minuses. Committee members, already angry that they would be able to consider only two candidates, told him no.

They pointed out that the ordinance forming their committee specifically said they would recommend a candidate, and that's what they planned to do. After interviewing Mike Ortega and Mary Jacobs, the committee showed why it should have been given a greater role: It's made up of smart, experienced people whom I, for one, would entrust with making the final hire.

"I feel like the process has hindered our ability to make a really sound and thorough decision," David Godlewski, president of the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association, said before voting hesitantly for Ortega.

"If I had to vote, I would vote for Mary and then pray like heck that we could put up with her," said Kelly Fryer, executive director of YWCA Tucson.

Their meeting was sandwiched between two public hearings about proposed charter changes in the city. If the city manager pick will have important short- and medium-term consequences, the possible charter changes will matter over the long run.

One of the outcomes the charter-review committee has hoped for is that the charter would establish who runs the city for once and for all. As it stands, the mayor has a big title but few powers, whereas the manager has a small title but major powers in administering city government.

The best outcome would be a city government that is strong enough to react quickly to situations such as the pod proliferation and the homelessness it represents, while being open enough to give its own citizens' committee more than a token voice in choosing a manager.

3/11/15

Becky Pallack - Az Star

If the City Council has agreed on who the next city manager should be, they're keeping a lid on it until their man or woman is locked down.

After spending three hours behind closed doors grilling Mary Jacobs, assistant Sierra Vista city manager, and Cochise County Administrator Michael Ortega on Wednesday, the council's only public action was to direct City Attorney Mike Rankin to "proceed as discussed" in the closed meeting.

While council members offered no details about that private discussion, in the past that has typically meant negotiating a contract with the first choice before any announcement. They gave no indication when the selection could be finalized.

Jacobs, 51, and Ortega, 53, both said their interviews went well and they appreciated the opportunity to interact with city leaders and the public. Both were expecting to know more today.

Earlier Wednesday, a citizens advisory committee recommended that the council hire Jacobs.

The committee was divided 6-5 in its support for Jacobs over Ortega.

The City Council selected the two finalists from a pool that started out with 48 applicants — the city initially said 44, but revised the figure.

A consultant reviewed all of the applicants and sent the 12 it considered most qualified to the mayor and council for consideration. The council invited six people for interviews, and two of them declined.

The two finalists completed two days of interviews and public meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday. The council voted to direct the city manager to take the next steps in the hiring process, but did not say in public whether they a job offer had been made, or to whom.

The citizens committee spent an hour interviewing each finalist Wednesday morning.

They are both strong candidates with similar qualifications, said committee member Joan Lionetti.

They also had the same weakness, identified by committee member Kelly Fryer as "a startling lack of creative solutions."

"The things they said seemed sort of textbook," she said.

Ultimately, the committee said, either candidate would make a good manager, but Jacobs' enthusiasm was especially attractive, as were her vision and her commitment to good communication and community outreach.

Committee member Mark Homan said Jacobs was supportive of local businesses and the creative class in her economic development plan. She was also stronger in her description of city staff accountability, he said.

Committee member Margarita Bernal said Ortega has a better grasp of the city's budget problems and could "hit the ground running." Some members preferred his management style.

The committee members hadn't received the résumés prior to the meeting, and several thought they'd be choosing from among more than two candidates. At least half of the committee members said they were disappointed in the lack of transparency in the selection process.

3/7/15

Tim Steller - Az Star

For months they've been waiting for the call.

Now some can't answer it.

The Tucson City Council appointed a citizens advisory committee in October to give input on the selection of a new city manager. It still hasn't met.

The city clerk finally let the 14 members know Monday that they'd be needed — one time only, nine days later, on the morning of this coming Wednesday, March 11. Some already had unbreakable commitments.

It was disappointing to people like Jen Allen, appointed to the committee by Councilwoman Karin Uhlich, who can't go and now will only get to submit some written questions.

"I agreed to be on it because I wanted to be on it," Allen said. "I wish that I could be there (because) it's really important."

The situation is emblematic of a manager-selection process that began in September but now, in its final stage, is suddenly compressed and difficult to penetrate on the front end, and has no clear endpoint on the back end. Four meetings will unfold in quick succession Tuesday and Wednesday, but it's unclear when a decision will be made.

Another member of the citizens committee who won't be able to attend is Keri Silvyn, an appointee of Councilman Steve Kozachik. She'll be out of town.

"I think the city should be embarrassed over the process we're asking them to engage in," Kozachik told me Friday.

One of the reasons the process is hard to penetrate so far is that the city has denied public-records requests by my colleague, Becky Pallack, to get the names of the interviewees. City Attorney Mike Rankin's argument is that, while the council is planning to interview a half-dozen candidates on Tuesday behind closed doors, those names aren't subject to disclosure until after the council has chosen a smaller group of finalists on Tuesday.

Council members repeated a familiar argument to me Friday as to why the names should remain secret — that applicants don't want their employers to know unless they're finalists.

But that's not the law. A 1992 Arizona Supreme Court ruling says the identities of all "serious candidates" for such public posts must be considered public information. Still, the timing of the revelation is subject to trickery.

When the Tucson Unified School District board considered candidates for superintendent in 2013, it interviewed four people behind closed doors. Then members emerged to announce they had only one "finalist," current Superintendent H.T. Sanchez, and would not reveal the names of the other interviewees.

The Star sued to get the names of the other three, but it wasn't until six weeks after Sanchez was hired that a Pima County Superior Court judge ordered their release — too late to make a difference.

This week's process will give an opportunity for public participation, but not the degree of participation Tucson is used to. The council will meet in executive session to interview candidates starting at 11 a.m. Tuesday, and only after it has picked finalists will the names will be revealed. Then, at 7:30 p.m., a public forum will be held with the finalists at City Hall.

Get that? You learn the names and will barely have time to Google them before you have your only chance to ask questions.

The next morning at 8, the citizens advisory committee will meet, getting a half hour to read résumés before members start asking questions. Then, at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday, the council will meet again in executive session to talk about the candidates with the city's executive staff and labor union representatives.

Former City Councilwoman Carol West, an appointee on the citizens advisory committee of Councilman Paul Cunningham, shuffled her schedule to be there after she got the notice Monday, but the process didn't make her comfortable.

"In this town, you know the culture: The culture is that we want an open process," she said Friday.

Former Councilman Steve Leal told me that when he was on the council and had to pick a manager, "there was time for meaningful input, not a token process. This doesn't seem very meaningful to me, given how truly important it is."

I agree with Leal, though I couldn't help but acknowledge the perspective Councilwoman Regina Romero gave me, because Tucson is sometimes more in love with processes than outcomes.

While the public gets a say, she said, "I personally think that mayor and council, by charter, have the responsibility to choose a person."

It's true: It is their job to pick the city manager in the end. But in Tucson, we want the public to have a real say, not a rushed input session that many didn't get enough notice to attend.

City Manager Appointment Advisory Committee Members

Member	Role	Appointor	Classification
Ms. Jennifer Allen	Member	Ward 3	City Resident
Mr. Timmy Bacchus	Member	Ward 5	City Resident
Mr. C.J. Battle	Member	Ward 5	City Resident
Honorable Margarita Bernal	Member	Ward 1	City Resident
Ms. Kelly Fryer	Member	Ward 1	City Resident
Mr. David Godlewski	Member	Ward 4	Non-City Resident
Mr. Mark Homan	Member	Ward 6	City Resident
Mr. Byron Howard	Member	Ward 4	City Resident
Mr. Michael Keith	Member	Mayor	City Resident
Ms. Donna Liggins	Member	Ward 3	City Resident
Ms. Joan Lionetti	Member	Ward 2	City Resident
Mr. Si Schorr	Member	Mayor	City Resident
Ms. Keri Silvyn	Member	Ward 6	Non-City Resident
Ms. Carol West	Member	Ward 2	City Resident