

Hills to hire national search firm for new city manager

BY BILL COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

The Farmington Hills City Council will embark on a nationwide search for a new city manager, but won't rule out an internal successor to Bill Costick.

The council voted at the regular Monday meeting to interview three recruiting firms that specialize in municipal managers. Bennett Isaacson Associates, the Boston company that completed the city's management audit; The Mercer Group, Inc. of Atlanta, Ga.; and The Par Group of Chicago will be invited to make their pitch at a special meeting Monday, Jan. 29 at 7 p.m. The meeting and interviews will be open to the public.

Council members discussed how best to fill the vacancy when Costick, who served as city manager for more than 11 years, steps down Feb. 20.

Council members also agreed that

City Clerk Kathy Dornan will serve as interim city manager.

In the special session before Monday's regular meeting, Councilman Terry Sever said the city ought to hire the new city manager from within. Sever pointed out that Costick, who has been nationally recognized and well-received by all sectors of the community, was hired after first being his predecessor's assistant.

"I believe we should be hiring from within," Sever said. "You're hiring someone you know instead of someone you don't know."

But Councilwoman Massie Kurzeja said former City Manager Larry Savage hired Costick as the first assistant city manager with the idea that he take over the job.

"I happened to be there the night when they hired Larry Savage," Kurzeja

said. "Larry came out of retirement just to take this. Larry brought Bill on board and groomed Bill."

Among the possible interim city managers suggested were current Assistant City Managers David Call and Steve Brock, Director of Public Services Tom Bissell and Director of Personnel Dana Whinery.

Councilwoman Nancy Bates said a recently retired city manager, such as former Farmington City Manager Robert Deadman or Troy City Manager Frank Gerstenecker, Costick's former boss who is retiring from that city after 26 years.

"If you hire from within, someone has a leg up," she said.

Sever said among Costick's successes was the hiring of a top staff. Not to choose a successor from within would show a lack of faith in the staff and undermine staff morale, he said.

"Some very qualified, loyal, hard working people will feel slighted," he said.

Mayor Aldo Vagnorzi said anyone, including current staff, could apply for the post. But choosing one insider over another might also undermine morale.

Most council members agreed that the city could attract top candidates and the residents expected no less.

"I have mixed emotions because it's almost as if you're being disloyal," said Councilwoman Vicki Barnett of a national search. "But when (former Farmington schools Superintendent) Mike Flanagan was leaving, the school board conducted a major search. They hired from outside and got Dr. (Robert) Maxwell. He is excellent in a different set of ways."

Vagnorzi and Kurzeja suggested Dornan as the interim because she knows

the city, has good people skills — and perhaps most importantly — is appointed by the city council. The other staff members suggested were hired by the city manager.

Dornan, who said she has no desire to become a permanent city manager, agreed to serve in the interim and hand over her duties to Assistant City Clerk Sue Rose-Halitz. Dornan, whose husband Mike is the Wilson city manager, said she would serve more as a coordinator than as the hands-on type manager Costick has been.

"I wouldn't be doing it like Bill is doing it," she said.

Dornan said that each of the departments would run under the direction of department heads.

"Unlike Bill, I won't know the answer to everything off the top of my head."

Costick from page 1A

Frank Gersenecker that prepared Costick for his Farmington Hills success.

"That experience was very valuable," he said. "Troy was much like Farmington Hills in that it was experiencing rapid growth."

Hired as assistant to then City Manager Larry Savage in 1981, Costick was well-prepared when he became city manager in 1984.

Costick helped guide the city through ambitious road programs, a huge drain system to solve flooding problems in the Kendallwood subdivision, preservation of natural beauty areas and parks that include the passive Heritage and Woodland Hills Parks along with the Founders Sports Park, a hub of active recreational activity in the city.

The Farmington Hills Activi-

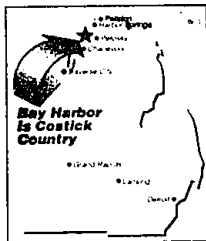
ties Center, formerly part of the Mercy Center, was purchased from the Sisters of Mercy, a state-of-the-art ice arena and passage of both a parks and recreation millage (1991) and the public safety millage (1995) have helped the city finance programs and hire more police and firefighters.

"I think the Year 2000 study was my greatest achievement," he said. "It brought in 150 citizens on planning for the city and that brought support for our programs."

In fact, that study and committee gave the city the blueprint for most of the improvements over the last few years.

The city also hooked up with other cities and government agencies on a number of projects including library funding, and waste hauling and recycling.

Staying within budget



All the while, the city stayed within 1-2 percent of its budget forecast.

There were no shortcuts for Costick, who earned a reputation for integrity and hard work while

surrounding problems many other city administrators could barely touch. Costick endured his share of good-natured ribbing as he would pull out a pad at Monday morning staff meetings with notes on fallen branches, downed signs and other details that might have escaped less vigilant officials.

"No one else is going to do it if you don't care," he said. "You have to pay attention to details. If you see a problem, fix it."

That may have been his greatest gift to the city, that he cared and it showed.

As he sat in his office a few days after announcing his resignation, there were neat stacks of materials on every issue, and phone messages.

"The three things you have to do is return your calls, don't lie and deal with the issues," he said. "Most questions and problems are easy."

And because he returned phone calls and attended staff meetings and meetings with citizens on every issue, Costick often had to work long evening hours to do the job.

After 30 years in the public sector Costick says he is ready to be "reinvigorated" as the general manager of a new development in northern Michigan.

But the controversial Timbercrest development and the resulting bitter recall campaign against six city council members helped give Costick a push.

"Public service is becoming more difficult," he said. "There is a lot of anti-government sentiment. Public officials are on the firing line."

Watching the city council take a beating over Timbercrest con-

vinced Costick that it was time for a change for him.

"Our local (elected) officials work hard and have integrity," he said. "Their reward was to take a lot of unfair, personal abuse. I hated to sit there and see them take that."

Costick does not dwell long on bygones. It serves no purpose.

So he'll go off into the sunset with his wife Pat to a new home, new friends and new duties. But it won't be a retirement. Costick plans to work "six or seven days a week" for the rest of the year in his new private-sector job.

And for his successor, it may be a different task.

"Everybody has their own style," he said. "I'm proud of the staff we have. So I think the next city manager will come into a good situation."

And as anyone will tell you, Costick hired most of that staff.

Goals from page 1A

ing a ripe age and will need to be replaced, Lauhoff said.

An underground tank's reliability is around 20 years. The city's three tanks are between 17 to 18 years old.

Fuel storage underground can lead to soil contamination if tanks leak.

The city is looking at going with a private gasoline vendor or working out an arrangement with the Farmington Public Schools. Another option is to go with an above-ground tank, which is more reliable environmentally but costly.

More than likely, the price tag could be \$250,000.

"Today, it's important to look for alternative ways to solve this problem," Lauhoff said.

As part of its 15-year maintenance program, the city will replace the dump truck and plow this year.

Downtown continues to be a major priority, Lauhoff said.

The city has worked with Kimco Realty, which

owns the Downtown Center, to fill vacancies there. U.S. Post Office will open an outlet in the center this year.

Renovations are progressing at the former Century 21 building and Larry August Productions is expected to relocate downtown. Also, Village Commons will undergo major renovation this year.

"There's a lot of excitement downtown," Lauhoff said. "With the things that are going on right now, the Village Commons and August Productions."

"We thought we were busy last year. We'll be busy if all this comes to fruition, especially this summer."

Residents will be kept up-to-date on city matters on cable TV. The city will reclaim its own municipal channel when the cable system eventually expands.

"People don't know everything that is available," Lauhoff said. "We're going to run a lot of infomercials."



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