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Merchants just want to know what's going on

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER

Merchants and business owners attended Wednesday's special meeting of the Farmington Downtown Development Authority to learn more about the selection process for a new DDA director to replace retiring director Judy Downey.

The DDA board wants to have a professional recruiter step into the hiring process. "We have the best interest for downtown," said Becky Burns who owns Farmington Bakery on Grand River with husband Jeff Pavlik. "I urge the board to have merchant input. I offered to sit on the selection committee. That offer still stands. Talk to Plymouth and see what they did to have so many people (100) apply."

Plymouth opened its process when it had eight finalists for its DDA director position.

The downtown needs re-energizing and filled vacancies, Burns said.

"Give the merchants a chance," said Nancy Leonard, a Farmington resident who frequently attends city meetings. Merchants didn't expect the process to be declined, said Barb Goins, who owns Celtic Shamrock on Grand River.

"We just want to know what's going on," Goins said.

Merchants with retail storefronts depend on foot traffic, said Laura Osborne, owner of Spare Parts, on Grand River. DDA board member Bob Heinrich said this shouldn't become an "us versus them" battle.

"We don't want to go into hand-to-hand combat,"

Osborne said. "We want to work in conjunction with the DDA."

Farmington City Manager Frank LaHoff was concerned about Burns making comments about people who aren't present to respond.

Selecting a DDA director involves trained interviewers who understand potential liabilities, LaHoff said.

Questions should be asked in writing rather than approaching the DDA President Ron Oglesby on the street and asking pointed questions, said DDA Member Craig Grace. "We shouldn't respond formally to an informal process."

"Is it legal to have all this open?" Burns asked City Attorney Tom Schultz, referring to the hiring process.

"Sure," was his response. "Having one person know all

the names fosters mistrust," Burns said.

She added that the city council earlier this year created mistrust in the way it handled appointment of new Councilman Mike Harrison by "skirting" the Open Meetings Act.

Toward the end of the DDA meeting Harrison asked Burns questions he asked her to answer for herself: "Are you glad of all this wreckage? Are you glad you wrote that letter? Think of the consequences you are creating."

It's a balancing act, Heinrich said. "It would be a shame if we lost some outstanding candidates, if they felt the spotlight was so bright," he said. "I ask for your trust when we go to the consultant."

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DDA

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Member Joyce Cornwell asked if the money was available to hire a firm. The board would have to look at a budget adjustment, LaHoff said.

This DDA discussion came after Becky Burns, a local businesswoman, submitted formal requests to the city Aug. 15 for all information connected with the proposed hiring of the new Farmington DDA director and that meetings be open. Burns is spearheading rejuvenation of a defunct downtown Farmington merchants organization.

Immediately, Farmington Assistant City Manager Bill Richards asked to be removed from the process and recommended that the DDA board re-advertise the position and begin the process again.

Richards, who also works as a consultant for the Michigan Municipal League, has philosophical differences about releasing information early in the process, which he said could jeopardize both the candidates' confidentiality and their present jobs.

Richards wasn't present at

Wednesday's meeting.

The 10 interviews scheduled before an oral examination board Aug. 20 were canceled.

The 10 candidates were culled from an original pool of 31. Only Richards has seen all the applications.

Burns, a former newspaper reporter who owns Farmington Bakery on Grand River with her husband, Jeff Pavlik, hand-delivered copies of the Aug. 15 letter addressed to Bill Richards, assistant Farmington city manager and Ron Oglesby, DDA president.

Several weeks ago, Pavlik spoke at length to Richards about allowing the public to have input. Richards said it was too late, because the position was already advertised.

Oglesby held an emergency meeting for the executive committee of the DDA board Friday morning, which was attended by Oglesby, LaHoff, DDA board members Craig Grace and Heinrich and Schultz.

The DDA board decided by consensus Aug. 19 that interviews of finalists for the executive director position will not be public.

They followed a process suggested and supported by

Richards.

The original search/selection committee consisted of DDA board members, chair Joyce Cornwell, Heinrich and Suzanne Paul.

The process may change upon recommendation of the search firm.

Here's how the process was originally set up: Oral examinations of the "highest credentialed and qualified" candidates for the position were expected to be held Aug. 20. Prior to that, the three-person committee would review the 10 applications for the first time.

In the first phase, an examining board consisting of Richards and two people he selected would administer the oral qualifying examination and assessment.

This determines the top three most qualified candidates as finalists.

Teri Arbenowske, assistant to the city manager in Farmington Hills, who has experience in economic development, and Annette Knowles, Allen Park DDA director, were to join Richards on the examining board.

Richards narrowed the num-

ber of candidates from 31 to 10. The one-hour interviews for each of the 10 semi-finalists were to be held in one day.

The interviews in the second phase, before the three-person board committee, would be held sometime during the first week in September, followed by the selection of one or possibly two candidates for presentation before the full DDA board.

If no candidate was selected, the board could go back to the pool of candidates, or could begin the process again.

Richards repeatedly recommended this process, keeping the selection process private until the final candidate is presented to the board though other DDA groups like the Plymouth DDA have held open interviews.

The intent was to make an offer of employment in mid-September with the tentative start date Oct. 1.

Timing is important because of Downey's retirement date, and the city's application for a much-coveted Main Street Grant to secure technical assistance.

It was turned down last year.

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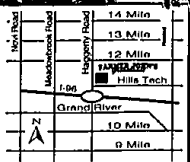
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