

'Small Pond' for City Job Hopefuls

By Glenda S. Jenkins, News Leader
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The city should amend its charter if it expects to have an ideal group of applicants for the city manager position, consultant **Colin Baenziger** told the Fernandina Beach Commissioners on Nov. 15.

"If I go fishing, I like to go fish in a big ocean with a lot of big fish," **Baenziger** said. "The charter kind of reduces that big ocean to a small pond."

Most cities give six months' severance pay, he said. The city's current charter provides a one-year contract and no severance pay.

Baenziger, with the executive search firm **Baenziger & Associates**, recommended in a Nov. 10 memorandum that the city remove from its charter "the provisions limiting severance and length of contract."

City Attorney Debra Braga will draft an ordinance for discussion to change the applicable charter provisions. Citizens must vote to change the charter.

The severance pay amount can be provided by ordinance or contract, **Baenziger** said.

"What I generally like to see is an open-ended contract where you can fire the manager any time you want and you just pay the severance pay," he said. "Of course if it's for cause, then you don't pay severance pay."

Baenziger & Associates performed the search for Nassau County Administrator Mike Mahaney. "I know he wouldn't have taken the job in Nassau County without six months' severance," Baenziger said.

Finding highly qualified candidates to take the city manager job will require severance pay and a longer contract, he said.

Otherwise, "the type of people who are likely to apply are those who are relatively inexperienced but want the title of city manager," or candidates "who can't find a job somewhere else," he wrote in the memo.

Full commission support for a charter change "will send a message to the candidates that the city is serious about attracting high caliber candidates."

But without a consensus among the commission, "the overall applicant pool will be small and not of the caliber the city deserves," **Baenziger** said.

The best candidates "will look elsewhere," he said.

"Potential candidates will ask themselves, 'Why should I apply there if I can only expect to stay about two years? Why should I move my family, buy a house and then just have to move again?'"

The search firm has met with each commissioner, with some members of city staff and with members of the local business community. An advertisement carrying a December 9 closing date has appeared in several trade publications. The firm expects the commission to select its next city manager by January 16.

The city has employed seven city managers since 1990. That turnover rate "has an adverse impact on the city's effectiveness and ability to complete projects" because "the staff alternates between wondering

who the next manager will be and adjusting to new management styles," **Baenziger** wrote, adding, the inconsistency "creates a difficult work environment."

Turnover also makes the city manager position appear "very unstable," **Baenziger** said.

Fernandina Beach Commissioners officially appointed facilities maintenance director Jerry Sinclair as interim city manager during the regular meeting November 15.

The commission voted unanimously to appoint Sinclair, who also serves as interim airport director.