

Note: Colin Baenziger & Associates conducted the search for Savannah's City Manager that is cited below.



Editorial: New city manager hire presents a golden opportunity

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City officials deserve credit for the professional and diligent approach they took to hiring a new city manager, who is the most important person in city government.

Last Thursday, Savannah City Council voted 9-0 to approve the hiring of Rob Hernandez as the city's top employee, who will be responsible for the city's day-to-day operations. He is expected to begin work in October.

The decision to hire Mr. Hernandez, who comes with impressive credentials, was blessedly free of the drama and politics that accompanied the council's past two city manager hirings. Indeed, as Mayor Eddie DeLoach put it, "I think we had a cleaning lady that would have voted in favor of it."

But this is the kind of job where getting hired may be the easiest part.

Mr. Hernandez comes to a city that is reeling from crime and poverty and needs better public safety and economic and job growth in the worst way. If he has ideas in those areas, now is the time to bring them. He will find a City Council and a community that will be very receptive to them.

The new city manager comes to town with more than 25 years of local government management experience — including the past three years as the deputy county administrator of Broward County, Fla. Mr. Hernandez will be paid an annual salary of \$238,000, and receive \$7,000 each year toward a deferred retirement plan and a \$600 monthly vehicle allowance.

In comparison, former city manager Stephanie Cutter's salary was \$208,970 after three years in the position, while the salary of her predecessor, Rochelle Small-Toney, salary was \$194,386 at the time of her departure in 2013. But compensation isn't an issue.

Savannah Alderman Van Johnson, who headed the council's search committee, explained that Hernandez comes from a state that has no income tax and city officials had to make his pay competitive.

“We wanted to make him feel we were serious about him,” Mr. Johnson said. “Hopefully, we create a long-term investment.”

Indeed, let’s hope he’s the last city manager that has to be hired for a long while. Fortunately, Mr. Hernandez seems to be thinking along those same lines, too.

“This next move of my professional career I hope will be my last move,” he said. “I intend to be in Savannah for a long time.”

As the new city manager becomes more acquainted with his job, he also must make the time to become more acquainted with people in this diverse community he will serve. That means getting out of City Hall. It means attending functions of all kinds, civic and social as well as business.

Savannah is a very hospitable town, but people still appreciate the kind of familiarity that face-to-face meetings generate. Fortunately, the new city manager won’t have to deal with hurricane recovery as Hermine only delivered a glancing blow to the city last week.

Mr. Hernandez, who will start Oct. 10, said his priorities will include developing a long-range plan for the city, addressing crime and poverty, assessing the conditions of the city’s infrastructure, identifying neighborhood and business concerns, and eliminating any disparities in how the city goes about buying goods and services. That’s a good list, especially the item about long-range planning.

County Manager Lee Smith, as well as County Commission Chairman Al Scott, have made long-range planning a priority for Chatham County government. Perhaps Mr. Smith and Mr. Hernandez can get together and work on a long-range plan that benefits the entire community, the city and the county. This presents a golden opportunity to get both governments on the same page when it comes to investing the public’s limited resources to build a stronger, more prosperous future for all citizens of this area. It must not be passed up.