

If the city council won't ax the city manager, ax the city council

August 28, 2006

After the "missing money" scandal at City Hall and the somewhat low key coverage by the media, one might think that incompetence and mismanagement had finally been rooted out with the transfer and 5 percent pay cut of a senior supervisor. That's the impression left by the Star-Telegram editorial, "Bone-crunching numbers" (Friday, July 28, 2006). One would be wrong to assume that the cancer has been removed and that we are now in a phase of rebuilding public confidence.

Though more damning, S-T columnist Dave Lieber's "Soap Opera at City Hall" (Sunday, Aug. 6, 2006) still leaves the reader wondering if the dysfunction within finance was known outside that department. To his credit, however, Lieber did something his paper failed to do when it reported the scandal, or in its editorial. He correctly identified the assistant city manager who was in charge of finance during its years of mismanagement: now City Manager Charles Boswell.

With two incidents of theft of public funds (without charges being brought), fiscal controls that allowed the disappearance of \$4.6 million, and the hundreds of thousands of dollars for consultants to dig through the book-keeping morass, the blame goes much higher than the finance department.

Indeed, let's pass the buck to where it truly belongs – squarely on the desk of Mayor Mike Moncrief. Moncrief has been disdainful of high ethical standards since he took office. The city charter requires appointment of an ethics committee. The five-member group is supposed to meet quarterly to upgrade the city ethics code, brief new employees and elected officials and report to the council on ethics violations.

Since 1998 or before, there have not been five committee members, and quarterly meetings have not been held. Committee members have not been reappointed by the city council, as required. The ethics code was written in 1978 and it has been re-approved by the ethics committee as recently as 1990. Former Mayor Ken Barr made three abortive attempts to appoint a new ethics committee. The first two attempts did not comply with the charter. The third died from inaction.

Moncrief hadn't made any attempt to appoint a credible ethics committee by June 2005, even though ethics charges had been leveled at him and others on the council. When he violated the state open meetings act by polling the council one by one just before asking for the resignation of City Manager Gary Jackson, he opened the way for Charles Boswell to assume the position.

Boswell, having been in charge of the city's finances for years, was affectionately regarded as "Merlin" by many on the council for his perceived ability to make money appear for some council pet projects when none was thought available. While Jackson was supposedly not in sync with the council's

“vision,” Boswell had been a key player in the abortive city hotel project and had brought in a garbage program that has yet to keep the promises made to the public. There has been a string of public development projects that Boswell could have advised against if he were really that economically perceptive.

Granted, his lack of guidance and supervision of the fiscal affairs of the city was not known to the council at his confirmation by an 8-1 vote. But there were other issues that raised questions of Boswell’s suitability as city manager.

Having not acted to create a strong ethical and moral climate at City Hall, how can the council and city manager expect any degree of confidence from rank and file city employees and the general public?

It appears that a majority of the council is not troubled enough by the theft and mishandling of public funds to fire the city manager, so it remains to be seen whether the public will be outraged enough by the existing leadership vacuum to replace Moncrief and other council members in the next election.

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