

EDITORIAL

## Ensure Oneonta's Professional Management Is Model For County

**A** sticky situation has developed around Oneonta's search for a new city manager.

One, the City Charter, approved by a 1,177-370 vote in November 2011, calls for the city manager to have a master's in public administration (MPA) and three years' experience in a "responsible executive position," or the equivalent.

But the ad placed to find a replacement for City Manager Mike Long, who retired at the end of May, calls for "a bachelor's degree with similar experience."

Two, the search is being closely held by Mayor Dick Miller and Common Council, with no representation from the community at large on a broad-based search committee, a best practice these days.

Odd, perhaps, but it turns out this is being done for a reason. There's a hoped-for pre-determined outcome.

Mayor Miller, Charter Revision Committee members believe even the mayor himself acknowledges, is partial to having City Treasurer (and interim city manager) Meg Hungerford succeed Long, even before the first application has been reviewed.

As you can imagine, this has the Charter Revision Committee in an uproar. (From the outset, let's stipulate Meg Hungerford is



Jim Kevlin/The Freeman's Journal  
**Longtime City Charter advocate Steve Londner asks the Oneonta Common Council's HR Committee to include community members on the search committee for a new city manager.**

an estimable public servant, but that's beside the point in this context.)

The committee, consisting of most of the former members of the original Charter Commission – only two couldn't participate – was formed by Miller under pressure after Long's untimely resignation. (It plans to issue a full report in the next couple of weeks on full implementation of charter's provisions.)

"Here are the two questions," said Laurie Zimmewicz, a business consultant chairing the committee. "Why are we not looking for someone with an MPA? And, why isn't the search committee broader? All I'm asking is for fair play here."

Steve Londner, a committee member whose interest in professional city management dates back to his participation in the original

the mayor wanted the afternoon of the HR Committee meeting.

No matter. This isn't parsing what the Founding Fathers may have thought two centuries ago; the original Charter Commission members still live and breathe among us, and their deliberations are fresh in their minds.

The intent of seeking an MPA and "combination of experience and training in municipal government," Zimmewicz, Londner and others will tell you, was to circumvent the "good ol' boy" network; to ensure Oneonta's city manager is a seasoned professional, with a broad understanding of the challenges, who will bring best practices and fresh ideas to Main and South Main.

The idea was also to replace government by personality with government by due process and consistent policy. In other words, is Oneonta that forward-looking 21st century city, or a banana republic on the Susquehanna, governed by personal whim?

This is uncomfortable to write, given our otherwise universal support of Mayor Miller's initiatives. He is an exceptional leader, an able successor to Mayors John Nader, Kim Mueller and David Brenner, his immediate predecessors.



**Oneonta Common Council members David Rissberger, left, and Larry Malone - they both served on the city's Charter Commission - should ensure fairness in the current city manager search.**

Likewise, Meg Hungerford is an able city treasurer. If Miller has been the architect of five city budgets now that have put off the day when the downward revenue and upward expense lines cross on the budget graph, Hungerford has been the construction company. (And, with an MPA in hand, she might be an ideal candidate for city manager – the next time around.)

But a city manager isn't being hired for Mayor Miller, whose second term is over in two years. A city manager is being sought who will ensure professional administration, even if the next mayor lacks Miller's vision, broad experience and determination.

It's time for people of good will, on and off Common Council, to step up and reclaim the search process

– and, by extension, City Hall – from the specter of cronyism. Two Council members, David Rissberger and Larry Malone, served on the original Charter Commission – Rissberger chaired it – and, inspired by the new era its adoption was suppose to herald, ran and won their seats. They know the issues; it's time for them to lead.

Interviews of the best of 36 candidates are supposed to begin Friday, July 25, so there's time, although not a lot of it, to adjust. At the Tuesday, July 15, Common Council meeting, Rissberger and Malone should propose a new search committee, and the mayor probably should not be on it. All fair-thinking Council members should join them in putting together a search committee that includes Common Council representation – 2-3 members, perhaps, certainly Rissberger and Malone – but also knowledgeable citizens from the city's professional community.

This is important, not just for the City of Oneonta, but countywide, as a 14-member Otsego County Board of Representatives circles and circles the inevitable: That county government, with part-time leadership with varied qualifications, needs a professional manager as well.

Fair Oneonta, keep lighting the way.

LETTERS

### Smartphone Cost, Service Show Flaws Of Capitalism

To the Editor:

Our Smartphone service at home is so bad we are thinking of turning our Smartphones back into just a cellphone. The taxes are also so outrageous. I pay for my friend who is in his 90s to have a back-up phone: \$10 a month plus over \$7 in taxes!

To reduce our phone expenses and cut back, we have to pay \$30 for a new service upgrade, even though we want a downgrade, and our present phone needs to be replaced for \$150 plus because they will not make the phone we have just a phone.

In Europe, Smartphones are around \$26 a month and the service is far beyond what we have here. Why do we pay so much for worse service?

In Sweden, or maybe it is Norway, if you don't have a good connection the government comes out to your house and fixes it. It is considered an important service; here, it is all caught up in corporate greed. An illusion that we have freedom.

The corporations have control of the government, so government does not act in the best interest of its citizens. The government also sees it as a way to squeeze more money from the public with more taxes to pad their incomes and retirement funds.

**• Ending "a": That is the way I see it.**

Capitalism is only great if you like to take advantage of people and reduce

Please See LETTER, A6

### Avoid 'Groupthink,' Expand City-Manager Search Committee

*Editor's Note: This is the statement Steve Londner, a member of the Charter Revision Committee, read to Oneonta Common Council's Human Resources Committee Monday, July 7.*

**T**he search committee charged with leading the effort to identify and recruit our next city manager bears a major responsibility.

Its job is to find and recommend a single candidate, or small pool of candidates, to the full Common Council that exhibit the best appropriate fit with both current and anticipated city government operations/needs, and with the broader Oneonta community.

I understand that, as of now, this search committee comprises only the four Council members who sit on the Council's Human Resources Committee.

I am writing to urge the Common Council to add at least two respected community members to this search committee. This is a well-documented best practice – board search committees for chief executives of public service entities (such as local government, schools, libraries, nonprofits, etc.) often include external community and client representatives.

The term "groupthink" refers to the well-documented phenomenon that commonly affects an existing cohesive small group striving to reach a consensus decision. Such groups naturally seek to avoid internal frictions, and isolated from outside opinions and influences, groupthink results in decisions being made without rigorous critical evaluation of alternative reasonable viewpoints or options for action, and/or also without full con-

sideration of the implications of the decisions being taken.

The addition of community members to the search committee should both seek to ensure diversity of viewpoints and enable the Common Council to tap into available local experience and expertise in executive interviewing hiring as well as in change management.

It is difficult to see any way that the benefits to be had by committee expansion – including the public's perception of the recruitment and hiring process – would not greatly outweigh any possible costs.

I would further note that the involvement of such additional people only in minor ways, late in the search process, will not accomplish the same things.

CATHERINE ELLSWORTH

WHERE NATURE SMILES ... AGAIN

### Those Who Lived History Helped Record It

*Editor's Note: With this edition, we welcome back our respected colleague, Catherine Ellsworth, longtime contributor of the beloved "Where Nature Smiles" column in The Freeman's Journal.*

**W**e, the he-we Jerry and the she-we Cathe, began writing "Where Nature Smiles" over 30 years ago in January of 1984. "Where Nature Smiles" had been a long running column in The Freeman's Journal. It faithfully recorded the comings and goings of the village over the years. And we continued in that vein noting who visited whom, who had dinner where and, if we were lucky, who married whom.

However, after a number of columns containing this sort of information, Frank Rollins buttonholed the he-we on Main Street and told him, in no uncertain terms, that people were sick of all that stuff. Instead, we should write about the history of the area. And thus began almost 15 years of columns which devoted, from time to time, a fair amount of space to what can only



**Jerry and Cathe Ellsworth collaborated for 15 years on "Where Nature Smiles."**

be thought of as the area's history as seen through the eyes of its then current residents.

For example, in the beginning of 1986 we found ourselves musing a bit about William Cooper as he wandered about his nascent settlement watching homes and businesses spring up. What were the proprietor's thoughts as he viewed the lake from the corner of Fair and Second (Main) Streets? Indeed fortunate are we to dwell in a place whose history has been so well chronicled and so well studied by so

many avid students.

However, this faithful recording of the village history presented a real problem for us, namely the task of procuring suitable challenging historical trivia questions. But we plowed forward, noting that Nathan Howard and Samuel Griffin were two persons who have some importance in the earliest history of the village. We asked if anyone would care to hazard a guess as to why. Fortunately, we received several responses to our inquiry.

Mac Preston, of Elm Street, and George Tillapaugh, of Pioneer Street, called to tell us that Nathan Howard and Samuel Griffin were two "firsts" in the village's early days. Nathan Howard, son of John Howard, was the first baby born in the new settlement and Samuel Griffin, a young child, was the village's first death.

Upon the little boy's dying in October 1792, a piece of land on the corner of Water (River) Street and Third (Church) Street was chosen for a graveyard and Samuel was buried there. Thus the Christ Church Yard

Please See COLUMN, A6

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