

Crossroads South Pasadena

Sept. 16, 2019

South Pasadena City Council
1414 Mission St.
South Pasadena, Ca. 91030

Dear South Pasadena City Council Members:

Crossroads South Pasadena is an independent, non-partisan group of South Pasadena residents and business owners. We do not endorse political candidates, or raise funds for them. Crossroads was formed in September as an informal discussion group to address growing community concerns about the quality and course of South Pasadena city government. We have many doubts about the direction of city policy, but three overarching concerns: 1.) the openness of city leaders to questions and criticism; 2.) city financial planning and the wisdom of city spending choices; 3.) stability in the retention of high-quality city staff.

To begin: Personnel is policy, and the available evidence suggests that the City of South Pasadena has adopted a policy of uncertainty and ineffectiveness. Four city departments are being run by interim directors, who in one case replaced yet another interim director: planning and building, finance, community services, library. The police chief and public works director are new. Few middle managers at City Hall are city employees of long service.

Personnel losses also appear to be serious throughout every level of the organization. At the August meeting of the Planning Commission, then-Interim Director of Planning and Building David Bergman discussed staffing problems at length, in his department and in the city as a whole: “We have no planning staff. We are not able to retain staff... Every department is understaffed. So we make do as best as we can with the resources that are available... I’ve had two interim staff people sent home by the HR department in the last two weeks, for various reasons... You should be concerned about the fact that we can’t retain staff.” (Bergman himself left the city soon after.)

Though evidence is limited, owing to the city’s limited public discussion of the topic, we have heard that fifty employees have left the city in the last year – a figure that would represent a loss in the neighborhood of 25% of city staff. That evidence appears to suggest poor institutional health. No government can be effective without recruiting and *retaining* good staff. A City Hall full of empty chairs and interim managers is unhealthy for the entire community. There’s no question that *many* people are leaving the City of South Pasadena. Why?

Point of Contact: Chris Bray

(310) 613-2291

chrisabray@yahoo.com

The game of musical chairs in city government leaves the city with limited institutional knowledge and an inability to execute policy decisions. The city's obsolete General Plan was adopted in 1998, and a revision is urgently needed. How does a city government successfully create a relevant, thoughtful plan for the future with interim planning directors at the department and division level, and an atmosphere of crisis among what's left of the planning staff?

An equally significant concern is the ability of the City of South Pasadena to make an effective economic development effort without strong staff of long service.

Our impression is that the City of South Pasadena is adrift, unable to retain employees and exceptionally unable to retain managers.

We ask that the South Pasadena City Council address the city's staffing crisis – immediately, urgently, openly, in a sustained and serious way, and above all in a discussion that leads to a plan for stability in experienced, capable, high-quality city staff. While personnel matters fall under the city manager's purview, the city council has oversight authority and a duty to ensure stability. Further, while individual personnel matters are confidential, overall personnel retention and quality, and matters of workplace policy, are not. We are not asking you to write a letter to us; rather, we are strongly suggesting that the council needs to put the city's personnel crisis on your agenda, more than once, and discuss it publicly and in depth in front of the whole community.

You are bleeding staff, and hemorrhaging managers. Address this.

As a starting point, we offer these questions and suggestions:

- 1.) Does the city's exceptionally high rate of personnel turnover demonstrate the presence of a dysfunctional workplace and toxic leadership? What efforts has the city made to survey city employees about workplace conditions and their trust in city leadership?
- 2.) Specifically, why have so many department heads recently left the city?
- 3.) What is the current rate of personnel loss? How many employees are leaving in a typical quarter, and what departments are seeing the worst losses?
- 4.) During a publicly declared budget crisis, what are the *costs* of high turnover? For example, did the city pay severance to the directors of finance and planning when they left the city after brief service? What were the costs of their early departures? Also, has the city received claims from, or been threatened with litigation by, city employees who have left? And what are the costs of hiring temporary staffing from outside agencies on an emergency basis?
- 5.) What are the city's existing policies and practices to retain staff who may be thinking about leaving?

6.) Related to the third point, we strongly suggest that the city manager provide a brief update on personnel recruiting, retention, and departures during her comments at every city council meeting. The council should get a *number* each time it meets: How many city employees have left since the last meeting?

7.) What is the *plan* to stop the bleeding? What changes are called for?

City management will undoubtedly point to a pay comparison as an explanation for personnel departures, but we expect that you will not simply use a discussion of turnover as an advertising campaign for Measure A. Clearly, city staffing losses are not solely caused by pay rates. The City of South Pasadena has, in the past, retained city staff in a city that has long been known for lower pay than neighboring governments; it did so by being a friendly, rewarding organization with close community ties. Something besides money has gone wrong.

We believe you have the best interests of the city in mind, but we're struggling to understand the direction you intend to lead the city. We hope to see a significant response to these questions from you as a gesture of good faith. What's the path forward?

Sincerely,

Chris Bray
Janet O. Marshall
Janet O. Marshall
Richard Marshall
Richard Marshall
Mel Zimm - Micah Zimmerman
Mel Flores - Melissa Flores
Delaine Shane - DELAINE SHANE
Russell Shane - RUSSELL SHANE
Dalle Chapman - DALLE CHAPMAN
Bianca Richards

E. Bogasao Anne Bogasao
Brian Bright (Brim Bright)
Guy Bright

CC: City Commissions
City Manager