

Unique Opportunity

The day of the Finance & Labor Relations Committee (FLR) meeting on Thursday, August 9, Finance Director Lisa Novinska accepted a position with the Village of Oregon and submitted a 30-day notice of her resignation. It was too late to place the matter on the meeting agenda, so FLR scheduled a special meeting for Monday, August 13, to discuss the Finance Director position.

Any position description should be reviewed before advertising to make sure it is still current and accurately reflects expectations and job responsibilities. The last time we replaced a department head position, we did not merely update the existing position description. The Water & Light Committee actually took a clean sheet of paper and identified the key job responsibilities – both existing and with an eye to the future.

Noting the unique timing with my anticipated resignation, FLR proposed taking advantage of the opportunity to recast two management positions. FLR proposed the possibility of combining the two.

Initial Thoughts

Initial thoughts at FLR were that a combined position would streamline some duties (such as budgeting) that had some overlap between the two positions. And it would focus on what matters by delegating and realigning some duties for office staff. An additional benefit, quickly recognized, was the opportunity to create a new Community Development Director position to take on realigned duties related to planning, grant administration, and economic development.

There were some initial concerns. It would cause a longer transition period, and not wanting to err when setting next year's budget or determining the property taxes. What and where would duties be balanced among existing staff? Would the new position description allow an appropriate segregation of financial duties? Would there be enough work for a full-time Community Development Director position?

The most important concern was that the City Administrator and Finance Director positions involve all departments in the city. A discussion about combining the two needed to include the full City Council, not just FLR.

The idea was presented to the City Council the next evening, Tuesday, August 14. The City's Council's initial response was that it could prove a real good restructuring and was definitely worth looking into.

Clean Sheet of Paper

Over the next couple weeks, the City Council were encouraged to start with a clean sheet of paper, to identify 5-8 essential job responsibilities, to consider the job (not the individual) and what they wanted it to be, and to list more detailed duties under each responsibility. With the

bullet-point list of responsibilities and duties, they could then review the existing position descriptions to make sure nothing important was overlooked.

At the next FLR meeting on September 6, the individual lists of job duties and other comments, were able to be compared, regrouped, revised, etc. into a single list. Actually two lists, one for the City Administrator/Finance Director and one for the Community Development Director. A number of duties to be delegated among other staff were also identified.

Detailed Consideration

FLR forwarded its working drafts to the City Council on September 11. More important than the pending position descriptions, the City Council discussed a number of concerns and benefits to even proceeding with the idea.

We are not the “bleeding edge” in having Administration and Finance combined; there are other examples. A sampling of municipalities with similar positions include: Baraboo (population 12,000), Edgerton (5,500), Kimberly (6,600), Oconomowoc (15,800), Oconto Falls (1,300), Reedsburg (9,300), and West Allis (60,300). These are not identical positions; however, they do have Administrators with greater financial duties than our current arrangement.

The estimated wages, benefits, and office expenses for the proposal are about \$14,000 less than currently. This includes budgeting a very competitive wage for the Administration-Finance position. But it’s probably a bit low for the Community Development Director wage.

We spoke with the Economic Development Director in Columbus, a city that provides a good comparison since it is about our size and also just outside Madison. He advised a range about a couple thousand dollars higher than our early estimate. We also looked at economic development positions currently being advertised in Wauwatosa and Cambridge, and they were in the same range. James Otterstein, Economic Development Manager for Rock County, later offered to provide some salary survey information to help us.

An additional financial benefit is that a full-time Community Development Director would allow some projects to be performed in-house rather than contracted out. For example, the ten-year update of the Smart Growth Plan will occur in 2014-2015. The City of Columbus recently paid approximately \$16,000 to contract for its update. It could also give the staff support needed to complete the five-year update to our Parks and Recreation Plan, a review which is presently behind schedule.

Combining the Administrator and Finance Director positions would eliminate having two managerial positions in the same office. It would streamline some overlapped duties such as budget preparation, which has caused some minor confusion in the past. It would flatten how the department operates, with the new position having direct oversight of all office staff.

The drafts of the updated position descriptions explicitly promote best management practices, lean operations, and professional training. Although we may undertake such activities already, their importance is emphasized by stating them in the position descriptions. And, if nothing else,

the mere willingness to consider combining the positions and restructuring the department effectively models of our expectations for thinking beyond the status quo.

Although short-staffed during the transition will be difficult, there is capacity in the office staff to accommodate duties “delegated” by a combination of the Administrator and Finance Director positions. For example: development activities, grant administration, and website would go to the new Community Development Director. For example: bookkeeping, information, and website can be allocated among existing office positions. Also, the upgraded accounting software (finally went live last week) and related efficiencies will help free up some staff time to take on new assignments.

Community Development

The proposed Community Development Director would provide a “point person” for economic development inquiries. Proactive economic development efforts are also emphasized in the position description. When networking with other cities (larger cities of 10,000 to 15,000 in population) at conferences, they repeatedly tell us how they feel fortunate when they’ve been able to create an in-house position for economic development.

Currently, our City Planner is in the office one afternoon per week. A new Community Development Director position would allow these services on a daily basis. Additionally, an in-house position would likely provide a more customized approach to updating our Smart Growth Plan and to reviewing other zoning and development documents.

Next Steps

The clean sheet of paper approach resulted in a bullet-point list of job duties. These working drafts will need to be fleshed out into more detailed, formal position descriptions. And, since the City Administrator position is actually contained within the City Code, it may actually require an ordinance to revise it for the combined position. This is not something to rush.

We have preliminary budget presentations this week, Wednesday, September 26. As the 2013 budget gets finalized by November 13, it will need to incorporate estimates for the new positions and allocation of the expenses across several accounting funds. The soonest we would likely be hiring either position is January.