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Pasadena Star-News (California)

August 19, 2007 Sunday

Tenacious veteran city manager likes challenge of job

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SECTION: NEWS

LENGTH: 786 words

Brad Baxter walks a tight rope when it comes to his chosen line of work.

As a career city manager, Baxter, 45, of Beaumont has chosen to work for cities that are crime-ridden or are facing major financial challenges.

But riskiest of all is his choice of career.

A city manager's job can be unstable, at best, due to ever-changing city council majorities, politics, and the fact that top municipal executives are often seen as "somewhat of a professional punching bag" - scapegoats for a city's woes, according to Doug Johnson, a fellow at Claremont McKenna College's **Rose Institute** of State and Local Government.

But Baxter says he likes the challenge, both of being a city manager and of taking charge of "tough towns."

"My career reputation has always been as a change agent and a person who has been able to tackle hard things," he said.

That reputation, along with reports of his short stays in certain cities, may have cost him the city manager position in Sierra Madre, he believes.

Baxter was a finalist, but when the council made its selection last month, the job went to Elaine Aguilar, a former assistant to the Glendale city manager.

"Elaine is just a very stable, calming, assured kind of person who just struck me as someone who could work very well in Sierra Madre," said Aguilar's boss, Glendale City Manager Jim Starbird.

Baxter admits that, because of his demeanor, he quickly makes both fans and adversaries in the cities where he works.

"It creates enemies for you because you're there at the council's direction to fix things that have been broken for years," he said.

For example, Baxter put together the city of Rio Vista's first annual budget for the fiscal year 2004-05 as city manager. Prior to that, the city functioned using line-item appropriations.

He continued to create annual budgets for the next two years he was in Rio Vista. And he built a \$33 million

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wastewater plant on time and under budget.

But Baxter made enemies with members of the local fire department.

He turned the spotlight on several firefighters with two internal investigations that revealed some employees were overpaid and were involved with "unprofessional conduct," according to city records.

His wife and children were staying in Southern California during his time in Rio Vista, he said. Rather than moving them up north, where he said members of the fire department were threatening his life and the life of his family, he decided to move on.

Next, Baxter took a job in Irwindale in the summer of 2006 but left after only nine months.

Despite reports of being "driven out," Baxter said he chose to leave to get his family situation back in order.

Baxter said he has heard from Sierra Madre insiders that the reason he lost the chance at that city's top executive post was because he was "too hot, too controversial."

Though Mayor Enid Joffe would not speak specifically about Baxter, she said she understands how difficult it can be for city managers to hang on to their jobs.

"It's a line of work where your job security depends on political things that may not be in your control," she said. "I never evaluate whether (a candidate) has had problems with a council. To me, that's irrelevant."

Bill Garrett, executive director of the California City Management Foundation, said the average tenure of a city manager in the state is less than four years, lower than the national average of five to six years.

"Councils are more anxious to see results, and if results don't occur, they blame the city manager," he said. "On the other side, city managers are hired not only for their expertise but because there is a fit with that particular group of council members.

"When that (council) changes, the fit isn't automatically there anymore," he added.

But Baxter said he isn't giving up on becoming a city manager.

In fact, he has thrown his hat into the ring for top executive positions in three cities.

In the San Gabriel Valley alone, at least four cities - Irwindale, Montebello, Monterey Park and Rosemead - are now looking for full-time city managers.

"He has a very different, very upbeat and positive management style," said Linda McPhee, the former president of a local service employees union in Richmond, Calif., where Baxter served as manager of the Recreation and Cultural Services Department.

McPhee said Baxter made sure that city workers who formerly had been drawing paychecks for doing little earned their money.

"He rewarded good work, and that was a concept foreign to recreation management at that time," said McPhee. "He was a consummate professional and he made recreation provide for the community with programs that were unprecedented. He did a really wonderful job."

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LOAD-DATE: August 19, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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