

Turnover frequent in town position Staying in manager job in Walkertown usually short stint

By Wesley Young
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WALKERTOWN

Ron Bell's yearlong stint as manager of Walkertown was about par for the course and longer than some managers lasted in the job.

Among recent town managers, only Bell's predecessor, Toby Linville, had a longer stay. Linville worked for two years and two months.

The town went through a two-year period in 1999 and 2000 when five town managers worked for Walkertown. One manager during that period quit before he showed up for work.

Bell left his post on June 28. The town hasn't yet decided on the timetable for finding a replacement.

Some who have held the post of town manager and former town officials said this week that the position has been a stepping stone for young managers hoping to move up. But the experience has been frustrating for others, who left for different fields or became embroiled in conflicts with town staff members or council members.

Linville found a better job, but said that being Walkertown manager is stressful.

"It is just typical small-town politics," said Linville, who is now the director of code enforcement services for Henderson County. "You've got folks with different opinions, and it is hard to get congruence there.

"Without any clear direction, it is hard to serve a council like that," Linville said. "Instead of having a unified council that is giving you one direction, you have five members that are giving you five different directions. You have to decide which one is more important at the time, and that is stressful."

During Linville's stay, the control of the town council changed hands. Mayor Tom Southern, who had spearheaded the construction of the town's sewer system, lost his re-election bid in November 2003.

Southern's supporters - council members who had hired him - were outnumbered on the new council, but Linville stayed on as manager.

"It is the same as when you get a new boss," Linville said. "You have to adapt. That's not saying anything bad about the group that came in, it is just different."

Linville found the new mayor, Doc Davis, easy to work with and said that he got only "positive feedback" during the one review he had with the council.

"I was happy there," he said, adding that his current job was "an opportunity that I couldn't turn down."

"Walkertown is a great place to live," Linville said. "It is hard to be the leader of it."

It "takes a certain kind of personality" to be the manager of a town, said Dot Duggins, who was a council member during the 1999-2000 period of rapid manager turnover. "It takes someone who is self-assured, and who is strong and doesn't mind the hard work.

"For some of them, maybe it was their first time when they were manager and they found out they didn't like it," she said. "The others left for better positions."

Duggins said that the low salary is one of the biggest causes behind the high turnover. Bell's salary was \$42,000 a year when he worked for the town.

Gary Looper, the village manager of Clemmons, had good things to say about his two years as Walkertown manager between 1996 and 1998.

"My two years were overall a good experience and it allowed me to be competitive for the Clemmons position eight years ago," he said.

It was Looper's first job after he retired from the U.S. Air Force.

"You might find that in smaller communities the turnover might be higher," Looper said, "if someone is looking to make a career out of local government that can be seen as a career progression opportunity. On the other hand, if someone were satisfied with a small-town community, they might stay a little bit longer."

Some managers left amid controversy.

The council hired Jake Gray in 2000 under a five-year contract that was supposed to give the town some stability and end a revolving door of town managers.

Gray lasted about two months. The Winston-Salem Journal filed a sexual-harassment complaint against Gray over remarks he was accused of making to a female reporter. After a closed session with the town council, Gray resigned.

He later filed a lawsuit alleging that the town had broken its contract.

Southern said that Gray's successor, Steve Hamilton, was an older man picked as someone who wouldn't be likely to use the post as a stepping stone to a new job. But Hamilton resigned after less than a year with the town after disputes arose between him and Lynn McKinnie, the town clerk, who complained to the council about him.

Southern thinks that one source of frustration for town managers dates back to the town's incorporation in 1984. Because much of the push behind incorporation was the desire to keep Winston-Salem from annexing the town, Southern said, many in town have doubts about how active town government should be.

"A lot of that was frustrating for a manager to come into," Southern said. "They are trained, and their understanding is that they are supposed to lead the town and improve the quality of life. In Walkertown there is a lot of resistance to change. A manager comes in and after awhile doesn't know how to manage."

Davis said it's true that a split exists between those who want to focus on growth and those who want to keep the town the way it has been. But he said he doubts whether that makes life difficult for a town manager.

"I haven't seen any town managers come in that were that aggressive and wanted to do things," he said. "It is a matter of finding the right people. We haven't been fortunate enough to find the right person yet."

- Wesley Young can be reached at 992-0067 or at wyoung@wsjournal.com.