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Editorial – Our view: The Morrill era

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Chris Morrill can't say he didn't know what he was getting into when he signed on as Roanoke's city manager.

In February 2010 — as Savannah, Ga., basked in 60 degree temperatures — a foot of snow lay on the ground in Roanoke. Not unlike the last couple of weeks around here.

A Roanoke Times reporter in Savannah for Morrill's official farewell as assistant city manager reported back: One attendee "handed Morrill the Roanoke weather report and asked if he was sure about this decision. Morrill smiled."

Five years later, he's still here and still smiling. Roanoke is fortunate in that.

Not least because he truly loves the place and believes in it, seeing virtues where Roanokers tend to see their lovely valley as less — as in, less than Asheville.

"People had this chip on their shoulder" when he arrived, he said in a phone conversation last week — not the attitude for getting up-and-comers to come and stay. One huge plus for Roanoke: "It has one of the most engaged business communities I've ever seen."

Another: The city is an easy place to get things done.

For real? The city where people can still argue passionately about the wisdom of razing Victory Stadium? And the City Market Building renovation? (Now completed.) And Countryside Golf Course? (Now gone.)

"People really are genuine here. It really is easier to get things done here because most people are reasonable. If you make a good case, they're going to listen."

Perhaps because they feel they are heard, as well.

On March 1, 2010, Morrill officially took over from the hard-charging Darlene Burcham. "One tough grandma," Mayor David Bowers described her at the time.

Burcham had leveraged the makings of a sustainable 21st century local economy during her 10 year tenure, assuring a new Carilion Virginia Tech medical school and

research center was safely anchored around Roanoke Memorial Hospital. But her top-down style had alienated a lot of people, including the city council.

The country's economy was in deep recession, as well — something even Burcham's iron will could not change. Local and state revenue declined, and the city was threatened with a downgrade in its bond rating. Forward momentum seemed stalled. Roanoke was ready for a change.

“The only thing that worried me when we hired [Morrill],” Bowers says now, “was that we wouldn't be able to keep him. His résumé was so good, and he made such a strong impression.”

Morrill shared Burcham's view that the city needed to keep investing in itself to speed its own recovery. But he differed in style. Morrill brought with him a transparent budgeting for outcomes process that helped policymakers set realistic priorities as they reduced the budget.

The city cut staffing and capital spending. But Morrill's innovative thinking and collaborative methods kept it moving ahead, bringing it to a very sweet spot just now.

“This really is our time,” he agreed last week. “We've made good investments. And we have to continue to invest if we're going to compete” — with the Chattanoogas, the Ashevilles, the Durhams — to get the millennials, the young entrepreneurs.

Downtown living was flourishing when he arrived, thanks to private developers who were turning historic buildings into apartments and condos. Continued public investment since — in the greenway, on Market Square, in a reimaged amphitheater at Elmwood Park — all contribute now to an enviable urban quality of life for a city this size. And private investment in new buildings is starting to follow.

Along the way, some of the city's prerecession plans were scaled back, but not abandoned, and an argument can be made that they got better. Morrill is most excited about what's happening in the city's libraries.

Roanoke couldn't afford a \$13 million super-library on its capital projects list. But it could reinvest in neighborhood libraries. “Because we were so invested in early reading, why not put in more money for children and teens, have lots of programs?” he asked.

That's what the city is doing. The upgraded libraries are popular — and keep the Star City Reads program accessible to moms and kids. This community literacy campaign

won Roanoke an unprecedented sixth All America City award in 2012, Morrill pointed out.

“Wow! Look at the things he’s been able to get us to do,” Bowers enthused. “Get us to do” being the key phrase there.

“I’ve heard Chris say, ‘Sometimes, Mr. Mayor, I think all I do is convene Roanokers about a problem and just get out of the way and let them solve it.’”

Meanwhile, the city created a reserve fund, turned a threatened bond rating downgrade into an upgrade, even as it boosted support for its schools to 40 percent of local tax revenues.

There’s an upbeat excitement in Roanoke these days — the fruit of the labors of many talented people, working collaboratively. Morrill’s strength has been creating the framework for that to happen, and putting together the right team.

“No one person can know everything and have every skill. The thing I can do,” he said, “is make sure I hire the right people.”

He gets high marks there, too. His first big decision and, in our view, most significant to date was hiring a new police chief. Promoting Chris Perkins, a community policing advocate, was well received in the community and looks inspired in these post-Ferguson days.

Bowers describes Morrill’s style as “more a round table management style: Bring people in, sit them around a table” and figure things out. “That’s what he’ll be doing with the snow removal: Bring people in to talk about what the city did do, and what it needs to do in the future.”

But here’s the thing: Savannahians who worked with Morrill said when he left that they’d want him back. And they meant it.

Their city manager since retired and was replaced. But the next was booted out in 2012, prompting an editorial in the Savannah newspaper headlined: “Chris Morrill, phone home.” Are these people a continuing threat?

Morrill chuckled at the idea. “I’m fully committed. I want to stay as long as they want me. I love the mountains.” Besides, as he noted, “This is the city of the future.”

“We’ve steered through the recession so well, and we’re not coming out limping because of the investments we’ve made. Except we do still need broadband; that’s really important.”