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New Administrator to Spend First Months Getting a Feel for York County By Marie Albiges

Neil Morgan will deliberately not take any major actions in York County, at least for the first six months as the county's newest administrator.

But he will be meeting people, touring county facilities and wrapping his head around the issues that surround the locality, which he said are not so different from his hometown of Newport News, where he served as city manager for nearly four years.

"I very consciously am not going to change anything significantly until I see some reason to do so," he said in his new office Friday. "I'm not just going to reorganize something, move the deck chairs around because I'm the new guy and I can."

After setting up his office in the county administration building Friday with photos of his family, coasters with the emblem of his alma mater and a colorful globe next to a comfy red armchair, the new York County administrator is ready to jump in to the gig left vacant after the death of James "Mac" McReynolds in October.

But he will be jumping in cautiously, listening and learning to the citizens and employees of the county and evaluating its strengths and weaknesses to create more long-term visions.

"I basically view the first six months as a time to sort of listen and learn," he said. "I'm sure there will be things that come along that have to be dealt with in that period of time, but my preference is to give myself some time to learn the people, learn the neighborhoods, understand the Board of Supervisors' priorities, that sort of thing."

The Peninsula is well-known to the Newport News native, who recently moved into a home off Dare Road with his wife.

"I have an affinity for long, narrow localities on the river," he said jokingly, referencing his hometown, which is surrounded by the James River on one side and York County and Hampton on the other.

The Warwick High School graduate received his undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia and his master's degree from West Virginia University and began his career as a budget analyst in Roanoke before getting a job in planning and development with Newport News in 1986.

After 1997, Morgan took on roles with more responsibility serving the Newport News city manager before securing the job himself in 2009.

In 2013, Morgan and his family decided it was time for a change.

“I had worked there for 27 years, and I was in my mid-fifties, and I had this feeling that I didn’t want to just work in one place. I wanted to experience something different,” he said.

The 58-year-old father of two took a job as a senior fellow in Virginia Tech’s Center for Organizational and Technological Advancement —“it’s kind of like a professor of practice,” — and found satisfaction in teaching local government practices and public budgeting to professionals and students.

But when the opportunity to go back into the field of managing a locality presented itself, he could not resist.

“I found that I missed local government management a lot,” he said. “There’s kind of a sense of purpose, a sense of accomplishment [in managing local government]. It’s kind of good to get up and go to work and feel like you’re solving problems and doing things that make a difference and there was less of that feeling in what I was doing.”

Despite the differences in population between Newport News and York County — the city has an estimated 180,000 people, contrasted with York County’s roughly 67,000 — Morgan feels comfortably knowledgeable about some of the regional concerns that surround both localities, including transportation, stormwater and sewer management and tourism, to name a few.

Looking further out into the future, Morgan knows he wants to address a few subjects that already stand out to him, such as the county’s need to diversify its tax base, continuing efforts to clean up the Chesapeake Bay and York River and the area’s eventual build out.

“For a community to be vibrant in the long run, there has to be new and different and dynamic kinds of things, but in a way that’s consistent to what’s important to the values of this community,” he said.

Morgan knows a bit about redeveloping corridors from his time in Newport News, where he helped revitalize the lower part of Jefferson Avenue and upper Warwick Boulevards and contributed to projects such as City Center at Oyster Point and Port Warwick.

“He was very instrumental in making that the nucleus of redevelopment in the southeast [region of Newport News,]” said city Mayor McKinley Price, who was elected two years before Morgan retired from the city manager position.

“I’m happy to see him back,” McKinley said, adding he looked forward to working with Morgan on regional efforts, such as the widening of Interstate 64 on the Peninsula, something McKinley said Morgan pushed for from the beginning.

For now, Morgan is putting his trust in his 707 new coworkers to help him learn York County.

“I know enough about Virginia local government to know that the county has a good reputation,” he said. “Its finances are sound, its staff has a good reputation, so it’s not like I have to arrive and everybody is depending on me to do something on day one.”

