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New Roanoke city manager Chris Morrill seen as a rising star

Chris Morrill's former colleagues in Savannah, Ga., have praised his commitment and inventiveness and urged Roanoke to hold on to him.

By Mason Adams

SAVANNAH, Ga. -- As a foot of snow lay on the ground in Roanoke and a wintry mix continued to fall in early February, the temperature was a balmy 60 degrees in this quintessential Deep South city.

A sign hung from the second story in the rotunda of its City Hall, "We'll miss you Chris," as nearly 100 people mingled to pay tribute to their departing assistant city manager, Chris Morrill, who will begin his tenure as Roanoke's eighth city manager on Monday.

Former Savannah city employee Robert Keber handed Morrill the Roanoke weather report and asked if he was sure about this decision. Morrill smiled.

When it came time for his official farewell ceremony, a steady stream of elected officials and city employees lined up to pay tribute.

Jenny Payne, who'd started in Savannah city government while still in graduate school and worked with Morrill for years, broke into tears.

"I'll never forget when I started this job working for you," Payne told Morrill. "You said there's nothing so bad you can do I can't fix it. You're so enabling."

She said Roanoke officials had visited her as part of their background research on Morrill before hiring him. Payne said it should be the other way around: "I felt like I should ask some

questions because we wanted to make sure you're good enough for Chris."

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Morrill was born the son of a Massachusetts mayor but has always avoided the elected side of public service in lieu of an administrative career.

"Civics is in my blood, but I didn't like politics because I'm introverted," Morrill said.

Morrill, 47, worked his way through jobs in Lynn, Mass.; Catawba County, N.C.; Lviv, Ukraine; and South Africa. But he has spent most of his career in Savannah, where he built a reputation as a financial wizard who can bring disparate parties to the same table and persuade them to buy into his ideas.

He'd worked there nearly 18 years and had risen to assistant city manager when the Roanoke City Council selected him from among 104 candidates in a national search to replace Darlene Burcham.

Person after person in Savannah praised his temperament, inventiveness and commitment to transparency.

From talking to civic and business leaders in Savannah, it seems like the biggest question surrounding Morrill won't be his competency, but Roanoke's ability to hold onto him.

"You guys have found a star in the making. Hold onto him," said Otis Brock, the chief operations officer for Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools.

In fact, elected officials there warned that they may come knocking on Morrill's door when Savannah's current city manager, Michael Brown, finally steps down.

"With the way he's leaving, I would think that they would recruit him," Mayor Otis Johnson said. "So maybe y'all better do a good job and try to hold onto him, because I think there would be a real push to bring him back."

Councilman Van Johnson echoed that: "He is a Savannian. He will remain a Savannian -- just on loan to Roanoke."

Morrill said he's committed to Roanoke and excited to get started. He doesn't see a move back south anytime soon. Even if he did, he said, he doesn't think his two sons would let him: They're excited about the chance for outdoor adventures in the mountains.

Roanoke City's new city manager, Chris Morrill, begins his new position Monday, March 1. Watch Morrill's going-away party and final days spent in Savannah as he discusses his philosophy of local government.

Video courtesy of Management and Financial Services Bureau, City of Savannah

"In Savannah, if you don't want to go to the beach, there's not a lot of outdoor things to do," Morrill said. "I think my family's going to love it so much that even if that opportunity came up, it would be a difficult thing to do."

His wife, Kimberly Morrill, and their sons likely will stay in Savannah until their house sells, or at least until the end of the school year. Declan, 6, and Daniel, 12, will transfer to a Roanoke public school this fall after years of walking to Charles Ellis Elementary School, where they attend a Montessori academy.

Their Savannah home is close enough that Morrill often rode his bike to work. He often made a 5:30 a.m. stop by the gym on his way to work, where he'd lift weights and do cardio exercises. Morrill eats healthfully, often going out for lunch but bringing it back to his office so he can continue to work while he eats.

Morrill begins his new job in the midst of a national economic slump and one of the toughest city budget years in memory.

He's well-versed in money matters.

One example: When he and Kimberly bought their first house, Morrill didn't want to spend 30 years paying off the mortgage. Instead, he said they opted for a 15-year mortgage and leased out the top floor of the duplex to make it happen. It's scheduled to be fully paid off next year, he said.

Morrill's also riding a wave of momentum based on recent successes in Savannah City Hall.

Last year he implemented a new budgeting system that shook up long-established procedures and the city government's chain of command. The process involved large-scale structural changes, and many city staffers were initially skeptical and defensive.

But Morrill used transparency to motivate change and force collaboration. He and the finance staff worked up revenue and expenditure targets, then posted monthly results on them.

"When we did things like started showing who was using overtime, all of a sudden the police overtime went down pretty dramatically," Morrill said.

He even broke up chain of command, encouraging staffers two or three levels below the top leaders to suggest possibilities for reductions or cost-saving collaborations.

By the end, most of the city staff bought into Morrill's "Budgeting for Outcomes," emerged from the process with a new sense of teamwork and helped close a \$13 million budget shortfall without tax increases, employee layoffs or cuts into core services.

Morrill said it's too late in this budget cycle for him to implement the entire Budgeting for Outcomes -- or some form of it -- in Roanoke this year. Instead, he'll pick up where Burcham left off and let the city's budget staff provide continuity for the process while he learns the system and offers ideas and suggestions. There will be no overlap: Morrill starts Monday as Burcham will be departing. But it was Burcham, the city staff and the city council that have put this year's budget process in motion.

Said Councilman Court Rosen: "This is something that the professionals in the financial and budget staff have been working on, something the city council has been working on. So I don't foresee any hiccups."

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Morrill grew up in Massachusetts as the youngest of six siblings.

His first government job was managing downtown projects for Lynn, Mass. -- an industrial city about the same size as Roanoke.

After less than a year he moved south for a budget job in Catawba County, N.C. -- he met his wife in an apartment complex there -- and then on to Savannah by 1988. A few years later, as he and Kimberly prepared to buy their first home, they made the decision to join the Peace Corps.

This was the time to volunteer, they decided -- before they had kids or put down roots.

The Morrills were sent to Lviv, a city in Ukraine. The eastern European country had just become independent again after decades as part of the Soviet Union.

"We were in the first group of 50 into the Soviet Union," Morrill said. "My wife helped start their first business library."

There, Morrill introduced a streamlined government process that helped open the door for privatization of the housing market.

In 1994, they returned to Savannah, and Morrill resumed his job as the city's budget director. Five years later, however, he went international again, this time to South Africa. There, he assisted national and local governments in reforming their budget systems.

"The whole world wanted to help them," Morrill said. "So they had advisers from Japan and Germany and Australia and New Zealand and Canada. And I worked with all of them, so I was able to really understand what is the best practice around the world."

After two years, Morrill again returned to Savannah, where he was promoted to assistant city manager." There's no doubt we're in a global economy," Morrill said. "We need to be able to compete ... [but] you don't compete by trying to be like everybody else. You compete by figuring out what are your strengths, what makes you unique, and how do you build on that."

The global influence is apparent from the walls of his Savannah office, decorated with paintings he picked up during his time in South Africa. One's titled "The Hug" and showed a father returning home. Another on the wall in his office's lobby illustrated the African tree of life.

Thomas Friedman's "The World is Flat" shared shelf space with bound city documents and Roanoke's fiscal 2009 budget plan.

Internationalism is also found in his approach to local government, particularly with regards to redevelopment.

Savannah's latest buzz-worthy project is Ellis Square. The city had granted a 50-year lease to a company on a parking garage that planners say disrupted downtown's feng shui. The garage was located at a nexus between downtown's entertainment, financial and retail centers. Paula Deen's The Lady and Sons Restaurant adjoins the square as well.

When the garage lease expired in 2004, Morrill concocted a plan to work with surrounding businesses to recharge the square. The city destroyed the garage and instead built an underground parking deck. The Savannah newspaper moved to the suburbs from a building that was also torn down; the site was used to build a motel.

The city has also used the space resulting from the garage's demolition for a new park, intended to mirror the blocks, or "wards," that Savannah founder John Oglethorpe used to design downtown. Still under construction, the new park at Ellis Square features a giant chessboard and fountains intended for families to use during Georgia's sweltering summers.

Morrill downplays his role in the project, disowning any claim of innovation: "There's nothing fancy there. You could do that here" in Roanoke.

But others say that Ellis Square couldn't have gotten off the ground without Morrill's work to get the various stakeholders to sit down together.

"That's a perfect example of where his strengths are," said Hugh "Trip" Tollison of the Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce. "From a business community point of view, it's going to be very hard to replace Chris in that respect. He gets the economic development piece. He gets the incentives piece. ... It will be a challenge when he leaves."

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Now, however, Morrill faces new challenges in a different city and a different state.

For starters, there is Virginia's status as a Dillon's Rule state -- where localities are limited to the powers granted explicitly by state legislators on issues such as taxing.

In Georgia, school boards have taxing authority. In Virginia, they don't -- and city managers and city councils are often in the middle of such funding debates -- and in this dire budget year, Roanoke school funding will be a major issue.

In Roanoke, schools receive a little more than a third of the city's general revenues, in addition to extra money that's been pledged by council members. For fiscal 2011, Roanoke schools face a projected budget shortfall of between \$11 million and \$15 million.

But despite its financial differences, Savannah's school system bears much resemblance to Roanoke's.

Under a fifth-year superintendent, Savannah school officials have focused on the twin goals of raising the system's graduation rate while also attaining national standardized test scores. The

graduation rate has increased from about 60 percent a few years ago to more than 70 percent now.

Most, but not quite all, of Savannah's schools were accredited last year. The few that weren't faced obstacles largely in special-needs classrooms.

Brock, the manager with the Savannah schools, said that despite the funding separation, the schools do work closely with city government. He said Morrill has been a big help: "I've picked up the phone a number of times to pick his brain about something or try to figure something out."

Morrill's inventiveness in working with private real estate is benefiting Savannah schools, too. Morrill worked a deal that involved schools temporarily giving up their claim to real estate property revenues from a riverfront development so that the money can be devoted to building infrastructure.

In return, however, the school system gets \$10 million upfront from a city bond issue that will go to capital work on the schools near the development. They'll also receive increased property taxes once the development is built out.

Morrill "really did a great job of spearheading that and pushing it and really getting through some difficult negotiations with the city, the county and the school district in getting us all to the table and agreeing on this," Brock said.

That agreement came largely because Morrill individually met with the various stakeholders and explained "what they're trying to do with that development, what it was going to take to get that done and how we played a role in it," Brock said. "I really thought that was a great way to do it."