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Search Begins for New City Manager

By **Glenda S. Jenkins, News-Leader**

The search for a new city manager has begun after Fernandina Beach Commissioners approved hiring a firm to start the process.

Commissioners voted 5-0 Tuesday to select **Colin Baenziger and Associates**, a West Palm Beach firm that assisted in recruiting Nassau County Administrator Mike Mahaney and the county manager for Clay County.

The firm assesses an \$18,000 flat fee for its services, excluding travel costs for the candidates.

City Attorney Debra Braga, now serving as interim city manager, presented city commissioners with three search firms as options following her discussions with the Florida City County Management Association.

"I think the benefit to having a professional search firm is . . . you have a really broad base of contacts that they can access, they will help you with the job description as well as meet with the community to really come up with someone who's good," she said.

Commissioners chose to select Baenziger rather than hear presentations from all three firms in order to speed the process of replacing Bob Mearns, who resigned abruptly Oct. 11

"They're familiar with this area (and) have recently conducted a search," Commissioner Bill Leeper said, "and I think the quicker we can get through this the better."

"The last time we used a citizen's committee . . . that whole process took about five months" with a deputy city manager on staff to manage the city in the interim, Commissioner Joe Gerrity said. "I'm not so sure we want to take that long. We probably need to use a search firm."

According to the association of city and county managers, the average search process takes from 90 to 120 days.

Baenziger will meet with commissioners individually and others, including members of city b The company will create a profile job description and distribute it through trade associations and publications.

The search firm provides a preliminary list of candidates to the commission for approval and conducts background checks.

The firm provides "a short list" of finalists for interviews, assists with the interview process and will negotiate contracts if requested.

Baenziger and Associates proposes a weekend gathering for members of the public to meet the city manager candidates.

Earlier during Tuesday's meeting, the city commission voted 4-1 to officially appoint Braga as interim city manager.

Commissioner John Crow voted no because he does not want to overburden Braga, he said, and risk getting "behind the eight-ball" with the city's lawsuits and other pending legal matters.

At the end of Tuesday's meeting, Vice Mayor Beano Roberts again voiced his frustration with Mearns' resignation.

"It's kind of strange that (at the commission meeting Oct. 11) the only two people who didn't know what was going to go on were (Commissioner) John (Crow) and myself," Roberts said, suggesting that Mayor Ken Walker told Mearns there would be three votes against him and that commissioners Joe Gerrity and Bill Leeper were aware of that.

"I'll correct the record here. I never said there were two other votes. I asked for it (Mearns' resignation) individually," Walker said. "I did ask the city manager to resign and I gave him the opportunity to argue me out of it and he did not and I let it go at that."

"Commissioner Roberts is making a lot of assumptions that he has no proof of," Leeper said. "I didn't know what was going to go on the other night. But when someone offers you their resignation, and says they don't want to be a city manager anymore, I take them at their word."

"Bob Mearns resigned because he had to resign. He didn't have any choice," Roberts said.

"But the damage you guys have done this city may be irreparable. We're going in the process of hiring a city manager. And when the city manager knows that what he's going to have to do to keep his job is not necessarily run the city but he's going to have to kowtow to whomever," he said, directing his comments at Walker, Gerrity and Leeper and calling them "graduates of the 'Ronnie Sapp School' of micromanaging."

"Ronnie was a past master at it and I think you guys have gotten yourselves in the same boat, and the city is going to pay," Roberts said, alluding again to former commissioner Ron Sapp.

"The quality of workmanship that we're going to get is going to be far less than the quality of a Bob Mearns," he said.

"We have a handful of . . . no-growth naysayers, know-it-alls, small-minded (citizens), and they're here at all the meetings and they make all the noise and you guys listen to that. And, unfortunately, you're guided by it. And maybe if this does nothing else it might wake up the 70 percent of the people in this community who don't vote. And when they can see what kind of government we have, they might do something about it." Roberts said.