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## **Hunt for candidates to replace Darlene Burcham as Roanoke city manager is under way**

By **Mason Adams**

Colin Baenziger, who has been hired to oversee the search for Roanoke's new city manager, is spending the week gathering input to help his search.

Mid-Atlantic cities with more than 50,000 residents might want to keep a close eye on their chief executives over the next few months.

Roanoke's search for a new city manager kicked off in earnest Wednesday, and Colin Baenziger, the owner of the Florida headhunting firm tasked to find Darlene Burcham's replacement, said he will be seeking out city managers and assistant city managers in cities and counties around Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland and other states.

He's in Roanoke this week for a series of meetings collecting input from businesses, city employees, educators, nonprofit groups and the public. His next visit to Roanoke will come in mid-October -- the week the city is hosting the Virginia Municipal League's annual conference. The timing isn't just coincidental.

"We will reach out to every city that has a population of over 50,000 in Virginia and try to talk to the city manager or the assistant and let them know about the opportunity and see if they're interested," Baenziger said.

The meetings will be used to compile a "recruitment profile" that will then be posted on the Baenziger firm's Web site, submitted to professional publications and e-mailed to more than 8,000 local government professionals, he said.

Baenziger told the city council he expects to receive between 70 and 100 applications. He will sort through them until the number is reduced to a dozen or so. After a series of "very extensive background checks," he will then go to Roanoke City Council to cut the number of candidates down to five. The council will then begin a series of interviews.

Baenziger said that unless the council decides to slow the process, the city should be able to identify and hire its new manager by mid-December. That would give the new candidate plenty of time to give his or her current employer notice, make the transition to Roanoke and then spend a couple of days with Burcham before she retires on March 1.

Although the public input is important, Baenziger said the decision ultimately comes down to council members: "If the chemistry is all wrong between the council and the manager, it doesn't matter whether the public or anyone else likes them. That manager will not be successful."

The question for Roanoke, then, is whether the high turnover rate on the council this decade -- Vice Mayor Sherman Lea is the only member who's not in his first term -- will handicap the new manager.

"Not when you get the right manager," Baenziger said. "A good manager will have been through somewhat similar situations in their own communities."

For this work, the city is paying Baenziger's firm \$21,750. As part of his contract he's agreed not to approach the new city manager for another job down the road. If the new manager ends up leaving Roanoke within his or her first year, Baenziger will repeat the process for free; if it's in the second year he will do it for his expenses only -- generally a third to half of his normal fee.

The Greensboro City Council used Baenziger's firm to find its new city manager, Rashad Young, earlier this year. Young, who had previously worked as city manager for Dayton, Ohio, will start his new job next month. Sandra Anderson Groat, a Greensboro council member and mayor pro tem, said she "couldn't have been more pleased with the process," adding that Baenziger successfully navigated a rocky political terrain that was left after the departure of the previous city manager.

Although Burcham was at times a polarizing figure who has made enemies as well as friends during her 10 years as city manager, she's not likely to have much of an impact on the hiring of her replacement. However, this process doesn't exist in a vacuum, and council members -- most of whom have worked with only Burcham as a city manager -- may well respond to her perceived strengths and weaknesses when selecting her successor.

Councilwoman Gwen Mason, who heads the personnel committee handling the hiring process, said it wouldn't surprise her if council members looked for "maybe a different kind of leadership style" when evaluating candidates.

Councilman Rupert Cutler had similar thoughts. "Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, and to the extent she does have any weaknesses we'll try to rectify that in the next candidate," Cutler said.

Cutler did compliment Burcham as a "hard worker" and said he hoped that the new city manager will continue to exemplify that trait.

The public meetings continue today in city council chambers on the fourth floor of the Noel C. Taylor Municipal Building. Baenziger will meet with business leaders at 7:30 a.m. and neighborhood groups at 10:30 a.m.