

The Roanoke Times

August 7, 2017

Roanoke hires new city manager from Texas

[By Matt Chittum matt.chittum@roanoke.com 981-3331](mailto:matt.chittum@roanoke.com)

Bob Cowell wanted to be Roanoke's next city manager badly enough that he turned down another job offer on a gamble he'd land the job here.

It worked out. On Monday, the Roanoke City Council unanimously approved Cowell, 49, deputy city manager in Amarillo, Texas, to succeed Chris Morrill, who left in May.

Cowell, an urban planner by training, arrives from Texas with a reputation for being calm, steady and collaborative, said Councilman David Trinkle, chair of council's personnel committee which selected Cowell.

He starts work in Roanoke on Sept. 5 at an annual salary of \$200,000. He left a news conference Monday afternoon to meet a real estate agent in hopes of locating a home in Roanoke quickly for him, his wife, Ellen, and their three basset hounds.

Morrill announced in February he was leaving to become executive director of the Government Finance Officers Association in Chicago after seven years as city manager.

Roanoke's two assistant city managers have taken turns serving as the interim city manager since Morrill's departure, Brian Townsend from April 15 to June 30 and Sherman Stovall since July 1.

Cowell had been a finalist for city manager jobs in three other cities recently, including Amarillo, Tacoma, Washington, and San Marcos, Texas, where he turned down the job in July in hopes he'd be hired in Roanoke.

He bested 71 candidates from 30 states who applied for the job, according to Colin Baenziger, the consultant the city hired for the job search. Trinkle said the council took seven as finalists.

Cowell comes from a city with twice Roanoke's population and an annual budget of \$330 million and 2,100 employees, compared to Roanoke's budget of \$282 million and about 1,600 employees.

Trinkle said Cowell, son of an elementary school teacher and a principal, impressed with his work in developing Amarillo's first multi-year capital improvement plan, its first transit plan and downtown revitalization. He also served as interim city manager for a time last year.

Previously, Cowell was director of planning and development in College Station, Texas, where he helped plan the city's "Biocorridor" with Texas A&M University, a research and development hub for vaccines similar to but much larger than Roanoke's joint innovation district project with Carilion Clinic and Virginia Tech.

Council members were uniformly impressed by how prepared Cowell was for his interviews and how knowledgeable he was about Roanoke already.

“You knew more about us than we know about each other,” Councilman John Garland told him Monday.

Councilwoman Michelle Dykstra praised Cowell’s attention to detail, his “passion for process,” and his “calm under pressure.”

Councilman Ray Ferris talked of the importance of regional cooperation here, telling Cowell, “You get it.”

Vice Mayor Anita Price lauded his “ability to identify challenges Roanoke is facing.”

During a news conference, Cowell said Roanoke has had great momentum and growth recently.

But, he added, “not everyone has benefitted equally from that. How do you help the other folks that are in the community to be able to realize the benefits of all that growth?”

He said expanding economic opportunities will be a focus, along with succession planning. Preparing for the loss of aging leaders is a staple of local government management everywhere, he said.

For his first year, however, “my priority really is to learn,” Cowell said.

While Garland noted Cowell was known in Amarillo for always being the smartest person in the room, Cowell said, “Right now I’m the least learned person in the room about anything to do with Roanoke.”

According to press reports, Cowell was well thought of by the city council in Amarillo, though they chose not to hire him as their chief executive.

Amarillo Mayor Ginger Nelson called Cowell a “superstar” and a “calm and stabilizing force,” in a May story in the Amarillo Globe-News. Councilman Mark Nair said in the same story that Cowell is “the key person that makes the city work.”

Cowell said Roanoke’s council was one of the aspects of Roanoke that impressed him most and fueled his desire to come here. They were friendly and collegial with him and with one another, he said.

Despite their being elected officials, Cowell said, there was no politics in the room with them.

He said he was humbled by their comments Monday.

“That’s a good way to start,” he said, “and it’s also a tall order, so I intend to live up to that with them.”