

Commissioners praise Campbell's work as City Manager

By Mike Lednovich

When **Sarah Campbell** took over as city manager of Fernandina Beach in December, she walked into a storm. Hired on a narrow 3-2 vote, only one of the commissioners who backed her was still on the board. The city was in disarray. The interim city manager role had changed hands five times. One of them, Charlie George, died unexpectedly from heart complications. Staff morale was low. Key positions—including fire chief and airport manager—were vacant. Controversial issues loomed large. Rayonier Advanced Materials (RYAM) was pushing a disputed bioethanol plant and had filed lawsuits. Brett's Waterway Café was threatening litigation. The historic downtown faced mounting challenges. Then, just one month into **Campbell's** tenure, the new commission voted to fire longtime City Attorney Tammi Bach.

Fast forward six months: On Tuesday, commissioners gave **Campbell** a unanimous vote of confidence during her first performance review. As outlined in her contract, she'll receive a \$10,000 raise for achieving a "satisfactory" rating—though the feedback went far beyond that.

"I think we're lucky to have **Sarah Campbell** as our new city manager," said Commissioner Genece Minshew. "She brings significant experience from her time in Orange Park and at the state level, if you were with her in Tallahassee, people stopped her in the hallway to hug her and told us how lucky we were." Minshew pointed to major projects ahead—revitalizing the waterfront and downtown, updating city facilities, and professional development for city staff—as areas where **Campbell** could make a lasting impact. Vice Mayor Darron Ayscue credited **Campbell** with stabilizing a fractured organization. "She came in during a rough patch of where we were as a city, calmed things down, and gotten staff to trust her very well—which is no small feat in Fernandina Beach that has longstanding members on staff that have been around a long time and been around a lot of city managers," he said. Commissioner Tim Poynter highlighted her success in hiring key staff. "She's hit it out of the park with some of our hires."

Before commissioners spoke, **Campbell** gave a brief overview of her first six months. She stressed collaboration over credit. "This has been a team effort. Many of the things I'll mention were already in motion when I arrived," she said. "My job is to get out of the way to make sure progress can continue to happen, and to step in as a problem solver and collaborator when issues do pop up."

Among her top staff appointments: Jeremiah Glisson as deputy city manager and Susan Carless as comptroller and Lisa Finkelstein in the newly created position of downtown manager. Key city projects under **Campbell's** tenure include the opening of Alachua Street to Front Street, the ongoing construction of the waterfront park, renovation of the historic lighthouse and the removal of Escambia Street. "I love the opportunity to work with you. Thank you to the staff. It's a very capable team," **Campbell** told Commissioners. "You all have a very aggressive project schedule. I look forward to continuing on in the next six months."