

## Council reappoints, mayor disappoints; Entire P&Z board resigns at meeting

BY: Connie V. Scott, Herald Reporter

Printed: Friday, Jan 8, 2016

EVANSTON — Community members packed the city council chambers on Tuesday to show their support for Paul Knopf, longtime city planner and director of the City of Evanston's Planning and Development department, who was fired by Mayor Kent Williams on Monday.

Knopf held his position for more than 30 years.

Since this was the first meeting of the new year, city department appointments were presented to the council. While the council must vote to approve appointments, they have no say regarding whom the mayor presents to fill these positions.

Prior to discussion, Williams addressed the room.

"I know this is going to be an emotional meeting," he said. "Regarding Mr. Knopf, it was a personnel issue and that is all I'm going to say."

Rather than combining the reappointments into one vote by the council, Councilman Andy Kopp requested each appointment receive a separate vote.

Each position received a unanimous vote, with the exception of Evanston City Engineer Brian Honey. He, however, retained his position in a five to two vote, with Kopp and Councilwoman Sandra Meyer voting against reappointing Honey.

Honey was out of town and couldn't attend the meeting, but when asked if he's concerned that his reappointment wasn't unanimous, he said, "Well, sure. I haven't talked to those that voted no, I just assume that it might be carried over from the (Bear Meadows) change orders; I proposed for them to pay additional money for the topsoil."

He said he plans to talk to council members and ask them why they voted against his reappointment and go from there.

"I'll try to make some corrections for sure," he said. "I'll try to improve."

Paul Skog also retained his appointment as the city prosecutor, but Kopp said he would like to see the prosecutor be more proactive in the courts.

"We are dismissing a lot of work done by the P.D.," said Kopp. "I'd like to see stronger prosecution."



*Former Evanston Planning and Zoning Commissioner Amy Velasquez expresses her disapproval of Mayor Kent Williams' decision not to reappoint longtime Evanston City Planner Paul Knopf at Tuesday's council meeting. Velasquez, along with the other eight planning and zoning commissioners, submitted her resignation at the meeting. (HERALD PHOTO/Mark Tesoro)*

No appointment was made for the director of planning and development.

The council made short work of the agenda, voting Councilwoman Wendy Schuler in as the city council president for 2016, and approving the financial disclosure statements.

The floor was then opened to community participation.

One by one, community members came forward to voice their concerns and opinions regarding Williams' decision not to reappoint Knopf.

Chuck Straw, local business owner and chair of the planning and zoning commission, said, "We are irate and have no idea why this happened. The firestorm has begun and this is not going to be an easy one to get out of. All of the commissioners have resigned — we feel that strongly."

Straw said the only way to make this better would be to reappoint Knopf.

Others had fewer but equally strong words for the mayor and council.

Commissioner John Holderegger stepped to the podium and simply said, "Accept my resignation."

Later on in the meeting, Holderegger stood again and reminded the council that it was Knopf who rallied to save his company, which has generated \$300 million in tax revenue for the area.

Local citizen Meryl Thompson asked Mayor Williams when he would appoint a new person. His response was simple, stating there hasn't been a timetable set.

Rick Lunsford, who was a city employee for 17 years said, "Paul is a meaningful mentor when it comes to community. Your city planner, Paul Knopf, had a hand in making this city stand out; making this community more than what it was."

Lunsford said he believes this is something that could be unwound, and he admonished the mayor to let cooler heads prevail.

"I've lived here for 76 years, owned my own businesses and was on the first planning and zoning commission," said Larry Holmes. "I don't think this is all Paul's problem. It takes two to tango. ... There are other problems, but things fall back on Paul. I'm disappointed a guy like Paul doesn't get a chance. He is well respected throughout the country. Do you remember what the river used to look like?"

Planning and Zoning Commissioner Deborah Demander said, "This is an egregious error and I believe there will be unforetold consequences to this city."

She ended by resigning her position on the commission.

"You cannot turn a corner without running into something Paul had his handprint on," said Eugene Joyce. "The way this was handled is appalling. To be informed the day before is appalling. He should get a gold watch, not the shaft."

Joyce said Williams should be taking actions that are best for the community. He then asked the mayor if Mr. Knopf is eligible for rehire.

"I'm not at a place to say," Williams said.

Local business owner and Planning and Zoning Commissioner Mike Sellers said, "Working with the city is sometimes sour grapes and sometimes sweet. Paul has always been willing to talk.

"I'm sad to see Paul go," Sellers continued. "I've seen his progress over the years and he has built so much. We are going in the wrong direction."

Sellers also publically resigned his position.

Planning and Zoning Commissioner Eric Mander said, "Paul has worked with seven different mayors. If there was a problem, which there wasn't, why didn't it come up in 31 years?"

Mander asked why no performance plan was set in motion to deal with this personnel issue; and said the mayor's actions were unfair to Knopf and the community.

He criticized the mayor and council for not attending subcommittee meetings, where Knopf would often take the city's and community's point of view into consideration and help come up with a solution to benefit both parties.

"If the community knew what was really going on here, you'd be gone," Mander said to the mayor. "You can't let personalities get in the way. This isn't a personnel issue, it is a personal one."

Mander and Georgia Harvey, both commission members, resigned in an email on Monday, after hearing of the mayor's decision not to reappoint Knopf. However, both also publically resigned at Tuesday's meeting.

Harvey, who served on the Planning and Zoning Commission during the boom, said things were very different today from when she served back then. She attributed the advancement to Knopf and his professionalism.

"Kent, you should have given him a performance review; that allows the issues to come up and be worked out," Harvey said. "He is strong headed, but that is what made him good. I resign my position."

Evanston native Amy Velasquez has been a school teacher in the community for 25 years, and on the commission for over 10 years. She said Knopf has been a mentor and an example to this community and to the state.

"We are going to be in a big hurt," Velasquez said. "Please reconsider your thoughts on reappointing Paul."

As the meeting continued, person after person praised Knopf for the work done in Evanston throughout his tenure with the city. No one came forward to say anything negative about Knopf or in support of the mayor's decision to let him go.

Evanston resident Marie Lynch said she had recently worked with Knopf on a building project at her home and that he exhibited great professionalism.

“I’ve followed his career over the years,” she said. “I implore you, Mr. Mayor, to not let pride and emotions rule your decision. It must work for the community.”

Planning and Zoning Commissioner Phil Petersen said, “I taught over 40 years in the school district and people stubbed their toes along the way. You didn’t throw them under the bus, you worked with them. You set up a performance plan and if they work things out, then you retain experience and vision. We’re getting rid of experience and vision. It is the stupidest thing ever. Get your head out.”

Petersen finished by resigning his position on the commission, but said he would serve again if Knopf were rehired.

Evanston resident Claudia Scott said, “I don’t know Paul Knopf; and while the mayor has every right [to do so], not informing the council or Knopf until the 11th hour reeks. Does he have a buddy in mind for the position?”

Scott then issued a thinly-veiled threat.

“That being said, mayors can be recalled, too,” she said.

Maryl Thompson approached the podium once again, this time to ask the council members a question.

“Were you involved in the process?” she asked.

One councilman made the answer quite clear.

“I would like to address this,” Kopp said. “I have returned more e-mails and taken more calls in the last 48 hours than I have in my full year as a councilman. We were not involved.”

“Then I’ll bring up the elephant in the room,” said Thompson. “Mayor Williams, can you tell us why?”

Williams was relatively quiet throughout the meeting, giving short answers to the questions asked of him.

“In my mind, my reasons are sound,” Williams said. “There were personnel issues. I weighed heavily upon this, and that is all I am going to say.”

As public comments came to a close, council members shared their thoughts on the topic.

“It is the mayor’s responsibility to appoint people,” Kopp said. “He is shaken up. I hope we can get together with him and work things out.”

Kopp addressed the growing social media comments he had read throughout the day, saying the social media “bashing” of Knopf was not fair.

Councilwoman Wendy Schuler said she was saddened by the event, and she enjoyed working with Knopf over the years.

“No matter what happens, Paul is a friend,” Schuler said. “He is a visionary and has put his heart and soul into Evanston. Everything he has done has been above reproach.”

“Paul has done an amazing job,” Meyer said. “I hope we can be fair and equitable in our discussions — for the community.”

Councilman Tim Lynch said, “I thought we were through with the Bear Meadows issue, but we’ve brought it into 2016,” he said. “This is a travesty. Paul made Evanston a destination, not a pit stop.”

Before adjourning, Mayor Williams asked if there were any further comments from the public. Rick Slogowski approached the podium to speak.

“I’ve known Paul for a long time; we’re buddies,” he said. “No, we haven’t liked everything that Paul has done. Some didn’t like the rocks in the river, but the Bear River is the city’s playground. I believe you are making a mistake.”

Slogowski then commended Kopp and Meyer for not voting to approve Honey’s reappointment, telling Williams he [fired] the wrong person.

As the meeting came to a close, Williams made his final comments.

“I’ve heard you and have listened,” he said.

Even though Councilman Evan Perkes did not speak during the regular meeting, he wanted to remind the community that council members did not have a part in making the decision to fire Knopf.

“We oftentimes get clumped in on things like these, but we didn’t make the decision,” he said.