

## THE OPINION OF THE RGJ EDITORIAL BOARD

### FIND A WAY FORWARD

#### City leaders must work to repair Reno's fractured government

Reno city government spiraled into dysfunction this summer. It could not have come at a worse time as Reno juggles major new development proposals, big population growth and the challenging transition away from its traditional gaming-and-tourism economy.

The problems reached a peak with sexual harassment charges by three female employees against city manager Andrew Clinger. Two investigations ensued. By all accounts, no work was getting done at city hall because of gossip, uncertainty and staff taking sides in the harassment cases.

In an effort to right the ship, on Sept. 14, the Reno City Council voted to pay Clinger \$228,000 in exchange for him agreeing to leave and not sue over his departure.

The vote was not unanimous. Council members Jenny Brekhus and Paul McKenzie opposed the separation agreement. They felt any decisions about Clinger's employment should have waited until the second investigation into harassment claims is completed next month.

The settlement includes \$30,000 for Clinger's attorney fees, which, if the investigation goes against him, he likely would not have received. On the other hand, Clinger could be vindicated. It is understandable to view a settlement as premature.

In an after-hours meeting with the RGJ Editorial Board, Mayor Hillary Schieve and Councilwoman Neoma Jardon made a reasonable case for settling now.

They said it had become increasingly impossible for city staff to focus on its work. Compounding this, they said, is the fact that no matter what the investigation finds, Clinger could not return. He would be open to claims of retaliatory behavior for future personnel decisions, whether against or in support of an employee.

"There was no path back so we took what was the most fiscally responsible path forward and got the staff back on track," Jardon said.

Schieve said, "This could've dragged on for months or years."

City attorney Karl Hall, who was also at the meeting, said the \$30,000 for Clinger's attorney fees was a tiny amount compared to what the city would pay to address any potential legal claims made by the city manager.

The settlement does seem to protect taxpayers from larger legal costs and from a lengthy controversy that would not burnish Reno's reputation. It also gets the city facing forward again.

In about two weeks, Reno will be able to officially seek a new city manager — and this is where it must avoid thinking the hard part is over.

The current drama highlighted flaws in the city's personnel policies. For example:

» Employee feedback on the running of the city is not always anonymous, causing problems to fester.

» There is no good mechanism for workers to report issues they have with a city manager.

» And council members do not receive all of the information they need to give a fully informed performance review of city managers.

There are more cracks in the city's internal workings. Through a public records request, RGJ government watchdog reporter Anjeanette Damon recently uncovered something known as the Olive Grove report. It contains the findings of a consultant hired earlier this year to improve relationships among the city's council members, the city manager and staff. Here are just a few of its insights:

» City staff is suffering from a pervasive lack of morale.

Executive staff struggles to prioritize important initiatives because of a leadership gap at the city manager level and because individual council members had been going around the city manager and communicating directly with staff to try to accomplish things.

» And the murkiness of the mayor's ceremonial vs. actual leadership duties has resulted in a "leadership gap."

In consultation with council members, the next city manager will need to deal with these issues quickly yet thoroughly and transparently.

The Clinger separation agreement was a good step but it, perhaps, was the easiest step. The council needs to be clear that the problems at city hall go beyond any current controversy. Further down the path awaits serious work to get Reno's government operating the way its residents expect and deserve.