

Reed will be missed in mayor's office

THE ISSUE | Corning Mayor Tom Reed not seeking re-election.
OUR OPINION | Reed has done a good job getting the city back on track in his 18 months in office.

Corning Mayor Tom Reed has his sights set on higher office, and although he hasn't officially said where he's aiming to go, it appears to be Washington.

Indications are he's preparing to run against U.S. Rep. Eric Massa in 2010 and, to commit to an all-out campaign, Reed is not going to seek a second term as mayor.

Regardless of how residents feel about that decision, there's no denying Reed has been an effective mayor in the 18 months he's been in office.

His first few months in office were spent undoing much of what his predecessor Frank Coccho had done in his chaotic two years in office. Reed was a stable, calming presence that helped return credibility and confidence to the office and in council chambers.

Perhaps the most significant accomplishment on Reed's watch was the adoption of the city's strategic plan that laid out a far-reaching vision for the city. The plan spelled out the roles and expectations for the City Council and the staff that previously operated without any real long-term guidance or goals.

Reed's law background made it possible for the city to start a special tax credit to restore landmarks and establish the Historic Preservation Commission.

Reed established some new fiscal policies including establishing a special reserve fund to stabilize property taxes. The recently adopted city budget used \$60,000 from the fund, which lowered the projected tax increase by 1.25 percent.

As for other reserve funds, Reed encouraged the City Council to relinquish supervision of them and place their management of the reserves with the city manager and finance director.

Reed's other accomplishments include expansion of the skate park, increasing the senior citizens' exemption, starting the Cold War veterans' exemption and improving relations with merchants in the Gaffer District.

Under Reed's guidance, city government righted itself and began a comprehensible course to addressing some of the more pressing needs facing Corning. Reed helped get the city back on track and could have accomplished much more had he decided to stay a little longer in office.

NATIONAL VIEW | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Courting trouble in W.Va.

Judges are elected in most states. The main value of Monday's U.S. Supreme Court decision in a West Virginia case is to provide another good reason why judicial elections are a bad idea.

In 2002, a coal company won \$50 million in damages from a competitor, A.T. Massey Coal Co., in court. With both an election and an appeal to the state Supreme Court looming, Massey CEO Donald Blankenship spent more than \$3 million in a successful effort to unseat incumbent Justice Warren McGraw. The winning candidate, Brent Benjamin, joined the court, rebuffed requests that he recuse himself and cast the deciding vote to overturn the verdict.

That's pretty astonishing, even from our vantage point in ethics-challenged Illinois.

In light of those circumstances, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, Benjamin should have stepped aside, and his failure to do so violated the due-process clause of the Constitution. His "debt of gratitude" was too big to trust his judgment in this case.

That may sound like a common-sense decision, but it will create far more problems than it solves.

Blankenship has been accused of acting to buy a judge. But only \$1,000 of his money went to Benjamin's campaign. The rest was spent on his own anti-McGraw appeals or given to a political group that opposed McGraw. Nor was this effort necessarily decisive. The winner was endorsed by nearly every newspaper in the state.

Benjamin should have

recused himself, but if judges did so every time they faced an alleged conflict of interest, precious little judging would get done.

When a lawsuit against President Bill Clinton by Paula Jones reached the Supreme Court in 1997, two justices owed a huge "debt of gratitude" to Clinton for appointing them to the court. But that didn't stop them from participating in the case — and voting with their colleagues in favor of Jones.

In the West Virginia case, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the alleged benefit to Benjamin was too great to allow his impartiality. But the ruling left open an array of questions, as Chief Justice John Roberts noted in his dissent — such as how much money is too much, whether friendships between judges and litigants require recusal, and whether endorsements by newspapers and interest groups "also give rise to a constitutionally unacceptable probability of bias." "Today's opinion," he wrote, "requires state and federal judges simultaneously to act as political scientists (why did candidate X win the election?), economists (was the financial support disproportionate?) and psychologists (is there likely to be a debt of gratitude?)." The answers to all these mysteries will be found only after years of expensive, hair-splitting litigation.

Here's a better solution: Replace judicial elections with a system of merit selection that minimizes the role of politics. As this decision reminds us, justice and campaign finance make an awkward pair.

ARTIST'S VIEW



COMMENTARY | ABEER MOHAMMED

Iraqis numb to violence

Maybe it should come as no surprise that after more than six years of war, many residents of the Iraqi capital are numb to the violence that surrounds them.

Certainly, the number of bombings and attacks has declined dramatically in recent months. Yet the sounds of explosions and ambulances rushing to the latest scene of carnage continue in the capital, if more sporadically.

One day, it is 34 people killed by a bombing in the Shula district; the next, 12 killed in the Dora neighborhood.

Few believe that the capital is reverting to the days of sectarian war of two or three years ago. However, most now accept that the violence will in some form continue to plague the city for years to come.

Some have never known anything but violence in the capital.

In the Ghadeer district of eastern Baghdad, Abdul Khaliq al-Shammeri watched his 4-year-old grandson play with a toy gun.

"He was not born at the time of the invasion, but he has grown up during the years of sectarian strife," he said. "All his favorite toys are weapons." Shammeri, a former Iraqi army officer, said he felt pain at the thought of the past and anxiety about the future. "It is too early to be confident about what lies ahead," he said.

Under an agreement struck with the United States last year, the bulk of the foreign troops are expected to leave Iraq by the middle of 2010.

But doubts remain over the ability of domestic security forces to take over, and Iraqis disagree whether the American presence should be prolonged.

In the sprawling slum of Sadr City, for example, residents blame the continued presence of U.S. forces for the recent surge in violence, arguing that Washington is merely looking for an excuse to extend its occupation.

Abu Mahdi, a cigarette vendor in the area, said, "America is behind all the destruction in Iraq. We have to kick them out. The sectarian war will never end while the Americans remain. They will kill people in Sunni neighborhoods and bomb Shia boroughs and then make each side blame the other," he said.

Elsewhere in Baghdad, however, many feel the U.S. forces should not leave until security improves.

"My friends and I agree that the Americans should stay for longer," said Esraa Alaa, a college student in the Zayuna district.

Alaa said car bombings and violent attacks would be a part of her life for years to come.

"I always expect a car bomb, but that does not mean I will stay at home

and surrender to my fear," she said.

That's a view shared by many young people in Baghdad.

Safaa Sahib, a law student, said, "We will have bombs from time to time — and who knows, one day I may become the victim of a bombing."

A young man in line at a recently opened alcohol store in the commercial Karrada district, who asked that his name not be used, agreed. "Violence will never leave us," he said. He pointed to his nearby car that had one of its windows smashed. "A guard from one of the (military) convoys broke the window there, but I still drive the car. You see, life goes on," he said.

He said he was indifferent to whether American troops stay or go. "With or without them, Iraq is Iraq."

Back in Ghadeer district, Shammeri said Iraqis were not yet ready to take charge. "We need more time to see if we can look after ourselves." As he spoke, his grandson took aim at a car number plate and missed, hitting its window with a stone instead.

"You see, we all need more time and practice," Shammeri said.

■ Abeer Mohammed is a reporter in Baghdad who writes for The Institute for War & Peace Reporting, a nonprofit organization that trains journalists in areas of conflict.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Eric Massa is dangerous

TO THE EDITOR | As a comeback to one of my earlier letters to the editor one of Eric Massa's handlers complained about the letter. He suggested that I was way off base and that I should contact Mr. Massa's office before writing letters.

Well, I did just that and guess what, I got a canned political response from his Corning office and I got no response from an e-mail message via his Web site. I must admit, I got very short with the young gal answering his phone in Corning.

My e-mail to Mr. Massa was very pointed and suggestive about the current intentions of Obama and his team of professional Socialists to destroy health care in the United States. I also asked him how he expected to pay for this government takeover of another large segment of our economy without onerous tax increases.

And as I said, I got no response from Massa or his handlers.

I know the answers to my questions but I want to hear from his mouth what he supports even if he again performs his typical

two-step dance to avoid exposing himself.

At least one of my naysayers suggests that Mr. Massa is a breath of fresh air. I find him to be a very dangerous person whose only interest is himself and he will do almost anything to reestablish the power base that he had when serving in the military.

And based on the phone calls and letters I receive I have a large and growing group of people who agree with me.

Count your days in office Mr. Massa, they are getting shorter.

Brian L. Miller
Hornell

Senate coup cuts voters out

TO THE EDITOR | New York state may have hit a new low with Monday's fiasco in the Senate. I seem to remember from my high school days that it was the responsibility of voters to select those persons who best represented their interests. In November 2008, New York voters made their choice, and it resulted in a Democratic majority in the Senate for the first time in 40 years. Now, the will of the people, represented by

their vote, has apparently been overthrown by two senators who have chosen to pursue their own political agendas.

The state's voters had stated that they no longer want to operate under the procedures of the last 40 years that have left us with budgets full of earmark items that have left our state near bankruptcy, but their will has been disregarded, and thrown our after a mere five months.

It is also quite curious that the issue that apparently led to Monday's attempted "coup" was not the financial calamity that the state is now facing, but rather the fear of bringing a vote on same-sex marriage to the floor. This is, of course, an issue about which most people have very strong moral views. However, I have to believe that most New Yorkers are more concerned about state legislative actions that have left us with one of the highest tax rates in the country. I believe most New Yorkers are more concerned about issues that hit them in the wallet than they are about bringing the single issue of same-sex marriage to a vote.

Barbara Crumb
Branchport

COMMENTARY | DAVID NICKLAUS

A long road back for GM

Contrary to what you may have read, General Motors is not too big to fail.

It was, in the government's estimation, too big to fail quickly, which is why both the Bush and Obama administrations stepped in with bailouts that total more than \$60 billion.

However, a successful restructuring is by no means guaranteed. This giant automaker could still fail slowly, gradually closing more plants as it falls short of its sales goals. If that happens, GM's shares will never be worth enough to keep two key promises: repaying most of the bailout money and providing health care to retired autoworkers.

Those promises are backed by the shares that GM will issue to the U.S. and Canadian governments and the United Auto Workers. The company's projections assume that GM can achieve a market capitalization of \$69 billion. That's \$22 billion more than its peak value a decade ago, when gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles were flying off dealer lots.

The old GM also turned a tidy profit from its financial division and European operations. With those being spun off, new GM must make money the old-fashioned way — by making cars that Americans want to buy.

John Wolkonowicz, senior auto analyst at IHS Global Insight in Lexington, Mass., likes the new GM's chances. It will have far less debt and its labor costs will, for the first time, be competitive with those at Asian- and European-owned factories.

With just four brands to support, GM will be able to roll out new or restyled models more frequently. "They had too many mouths to feed" with resources spread across eight brands, Wolkonowicz says.

Though he's an optimist, Wolkonowicz thinks GM's own projections are too rosy. The company expects to capture 19 percent of the U.S. market next year; he marks that down to 17 percent. The company says it will be running its factories at full tilt by 2011; IHS Global Insight says that will take until 2014.

The most important variable is also the hardest to predict: Will consumers buy what GM is selling? Some of its most loyal customers — the buy-American crowd — may be angry about the taxpayer bailout. Other buyers may question the company's stability, given the wrenching changes of the past six months.

Young car shoppers will have a lot to say about whether GM and Chrysler succeed. Twenty-somethings, who haven't yet formed strong brand loyalties, may look for something that isn't their parents' Toyota or Honda. "One of the brands that Generation Y likes a lot is Cadillac," Wolkonowicz says. "They can't afford it yet, but they like it. This generation is still up for grabs; there is an opportunity for GM."

Perhaps. Right now, though, GM has more challenges than opportunities. A bankruptcy judge can eliminate debts and reject dealer contracts, but the company is on its own when it comes to building better cars and improving its image.

"I'm not seeing how the problems with technology, lack of design, long-term quality issues and the cost issues that have plagued GM are being dealt with," says Glenn MacDonald, the Olin professor of economics and strategy at Washington University. "I don't feel optimistic about the long run. They will come out of bankruptcy, but how do you take on Honda and Toyota or even Ford when everybody is concerned that you might go out of business?"

■ David Nicklaus is a columnist for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

LETTERS POLICY | THE LEADER

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