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Experts: City manager must excel at politics, organizational skills

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MICHAEL NOVINSON

Worcester's next city manager should be adept at overseeing a large organization, practicing long-range thinking and developing the political muscle to see changes through, according to a panel of experts.

"For a successful candidate to be a successful manager, he or she needs to be able to build their own base of support," Chelsea City Manager Jay Ash told some 200 people at the DCU Center on Thursday.

The Worcester Regional Research Bureau invited Ash, former Worcester manager Michael O'Brien and ex-Lowell manager Bernard Lynch to its annual meeting to provide insight into the strengths and challenges of the city manager position. Worcester is seeking a permanent replacement to O'Brien, who left in January for a job with a Boston-based real estate firm.

Lynch said the city manager role – which dates back more than a century – was originally intended to emulate the

private sector by placing a technocrat, rather than a politician, at the top. But city managers can no longer spend most of their time in city hall crunching numbers, he said.

Instead, they must confront their greatest vulnerability – the absence of a natural base of support – by getting out into the community regularly and offering their perspective to stakeholders.

Managers need to persuade not only members of the public, but also members of the city council. O'Brien had to answer to Worcester's 11-member council during his decade on the job.

"You have to learn how to count to six to accomplish the goals you've set out," O'Brien said.

But the lack of innate political power for a manager also results in fewer constraints. As an appointed position, O'Brien said it's easier for a manager to remain focused on both the potential and liabilities a city faces five or 10 years down the road.

"A two-year election cycle leads to two-year thinking (for some elected officials)," he said.

In Worcester, O'Brien said that long-range view meant taking on unfunded mandates and retiree health care liabilities of more than \$1 billion. It also means, in an era of declining federal and state aid, promoting economic development so that a balanced budget can be maintained without severe cuts to services, Ash said.

O'Brien touted Worcester's work in forming public-private partnerships to advance economic development priorities such as the mixed-use CitySquare development Downtown.

A city manager must be more than just a financial whiz, though, Ash said.

In fact, he cited financial expertise as the least important key skill for an incoming city manager to have since

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it can be acquired on the job. He also said cities are very limited under state law as to how they can go about raising money.

Similarly, he said public relations has limited value since there's only so much bad news that can be spun.

"Public relations doesn't much matter if you're delivering the bacon," Ash said.

What is important?

Building a strong organization and nurturing good relationships so that all of the city's 1,700 employees are pulling in the same direction at the same time.

Part of building a quality organization, Lynch said, is filling key department roles with the most qualified and experienced professionals, even if they don't reside in or have much familiarity with your city.

That same logic also applies to the city manager selection process, Ash said. He dismissed the idea that only someone who's a native or resident of that city would be fit to manage it.

"Imagine you have brain cancer," Ash said. "Do you want your neighbor to do the surgery, or do you want to find the best possible brain surgeon in America?"

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