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Sunday, June 8, 2014

Manager school

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It wasn't billed as a primer on what to look for in Worcester's next city manager, but the 29th annual meeting of The Research Bureau, held Thursday afternoon at the DCU Center, could certainly have been viewed that way.

The three speakers — former Worcester city manager Michael V. O'Brien, current Chelsea City Manager Jay Ash, and former Lowell city manager Bernard F. Lynch — offered their thoughts on how to effectively manage a municipality.

Mr. O'Brien, who left his position five months ago after a decade at the helm, said he was fortunate to take advantage of good timing, and a city that was ready at long last to shed its feelings of inferiority and "woe is me" attitude.

"It takes doers in the community willing to roll up their sleeves and do the work every day," he declared.

Mr. Ash, a Clark University graduate, helped further focus attention on the upcoming search for a new Worcester city manager, when he addressed a question about whether a local candidate is better.

Imagine you have brain cancer, he told the audience, and ask yourself whether you'd want your neighbor to operate on you, or the best doctor you could find.

"I'm puzzled at times why we think zip code matters," Mr. Ash said.

We couldn't agree more, and we second the thoughts of all three men, who found common ground on a number of managerial points, including the importance of clear policymaking, building alliances and partnerships in the community, and striving to master politics without falling victim to partisanship.

From balancing budgets to promoting economic development, worrying about public safety, addressing unfunded pension liabilities, and fending off the constituencies whose constant demands tend to divert a manager from his most important agenda items, the three panelists laid out a virtual blueprint for the parameters of an effective search for a manager.

Mr. Ash added a cautionary note about public input, saying that while he was certain about whom he would chose for Chelsea's police chief, input from a panel of citizens and officials from Chelsea and elsewhere persuaded him to make a different choice.

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Happily, several Worcester city councilors were in attendance Thursday, and attendees included many of the city's business leaders. The messages from Mr. O'Brien, Mr. Ash, and Mr. Lynch have been heard.

This year's meeting of the Research Bureau was the first under its new executive director, Timothy J. McGourthy. That its program wound up addressing the most important decision currently facing Worcester neatly exemplified the organization's ongoing, seamless, and invaluable service to the Heart of the Commonwealth.

Whatever the City Council's next move in the search for new leadership, it can hardly have found a better study guide than that on offer Thursday afternoon.

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