

Like Big Fish in a Small Pond

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – June 9, 2013

Last week, while defending raises for Covington officials, I criticized East Ward council members and the mayor for not seeking training and networking to inform their decision making. In an editorial preceding my column, the Covington News called out some council members for micromanaging city affairs. I share that view, and it is this combination of under-informed over-involvement that concerns me.

Anyone who's followed my column knows I don't dwell on finding fault with others. Especially with elected officials, I respect that these men and women put themselves forward for public service while most citizens are unwilling. And, as the spouse of a former public servant, I never forget our public officials have families who take attacks on their loved ones just as personally as I did.

I try not to focus on what others should do, preferring instead to find what I can do to make a difference in my town or world. In my life's journey, I've learned enough to realize the only person I can change is me.

But, sometimes, speaking up is taking responsibility. When we see actions moving our community in a wrong direction, we have an obligation as engaged citizens to get involved.

Watching events unfold, there are no recent catastrophes impacting our community. But, viewed as a whole, the trend is concerning. And, the comments I've received this week tell me I'm not alone in that thinking.

Change is inevitable and healthy. But, when haphazard disruption becomes the norm in a community with a half-century tradition of stable leadership and thoughtful planning, we must take heed.

For 25 years under City Manager Frank Turner and seven with his successor, Steve Horton, at the helm, Covington prospered in good times and in bad. Through forward-thinking investments, a tax base bolstered by industrial recruitment, and profitable utilities, Covington has weathered many storms – even the “Great Recession.”

But, such stability has eluded us since 2011, as Mayor Kim Carter chose not to seek re-election, Horton announced his retirement, the City Utilities Director is retiring, and the Main Street Program Director has resigned. At the Chamber of Commerce, the retirement of the Tourism Director and the departure of the Vice President of Economic Development and Director of Business and Workforce Development are also major impacts.

With the exception of the Mayor's departure, I have no basis to speculate about motivations for any of these other actions. But, it is important to recognize the broad visibility and importance these positions have. That the Mayor and City Manager represent our City to the state and beyond is obvious. But, the Main Street Director, Tourism Director, Utilities Director, and VP of Economic Development are more crucial connections for our community than most people realize.

The Main Street Director works closely with the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), which oversees many of the state and federal grant programs that funnel investment to our community. The Tourism Director works hand-in-hand with multiple state agencies, including the Georgia Department of Economic Development and the Georgia Department of Film, Music and Digital Entertainment. The Utilities Director represents Covington with the Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia (MEAG) and the Municipal Gas Authority of Georgia (MGAG), where the city has hundreds of millions of dollars invested in long-range energy sources. And, of course, the local Office of Economic Development is our face to state agencies and national and international firms bringing investment to our area.

With so much leadership turnover, the eyes of the state are upon us. People are asking "what's going on in Covington?" It's something we should all be asking. I'm not questioning the ability of the newly appointed leaders to fill vacant shoes, but losing so many professional ties at once is a big risk in a world where relationships are everything.

By failing to get educated, our new breed of elected leader takes an incomplete – and thus short-sighted, inward-focused -- view of these critical functions. They would do well to put more energy and attention into bolstering our standing in the state and region, while spending less time listening to the petty conflicts and personal agendas of those whispering in their ears.

By creating a politically charged environment, elected officials are stifling innovation and discouraging responsible leadership. Meddling without taking time to become educated, informed, or connected, they are doing harm and undoing progress.

Here in our small pond, the struggle to become biggest fish makes large waves. But, out there in the greater ocean, life will soon go on without us.