



Local Matters.

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Centennial works through kinks of municipal power

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Part 1 of 2

By Peter Jones
Special to CCN

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Editor's note: As Centennial marks its 10th anniversary, the city is feeling its share of growing pains. In the first in a two-part series, Colorado Community Newspapers examines recent conflicts about who is and should be running the home-rule city of 103,000 people.

A year ago this month, Centennial City Councilmember Rebecca McClellan was rolling her eyes as public-works director Dave Zelenok talked money. This was not to be the calmest of city council meetings.

McClellan's proposal for more government openness would be expensive, Zelenok said. It would cost \$500,000 and some 1,000 hours of staff time to keep the council fully abreast of a major public-works project.

McClellan's jaw dropped.

She had wanted the council to be kept in the loop about all meetings and documents related to the redesign of the busy interchange of I-25 and Arapahoe Road. It was a matter of simple communication, McClellan thought.

Not so, argued Zelenok.

To comply, he said, he would need to issue a memorandum on virtually every piece of related minutia that crossed his desk. He would likewise have to document all informal conversations among staff on the matter.

Besides, Zelenok said, the processes related to the interchange redesign had already been very transparent to the letter of federal law.

He recommended the council reject McClellan's initiative.

"It's not only in our opinion unnecessarily redundant, but could slow down the decision-making process considerably and could potentially hurt our chances of getting federal funding," Zelenok warned.



City Manager Jacque Wedding Scott, center, listens to Mayor Cathy Noon's State of Our City address last April. Some on the city council have resisted efforts to put the city manager on center stage of government operations. File photo

McClellan's proposal was rejected — but not before the councilmember spoke her piece about communication between elected officials and city employees.

"I don't see how that should cost half a million dollars," she said, exasperated. "This is about transparency between our staff and our city council."

The exchange was a culmination of tensions.

McClellan had been Centennial's representative on an intergovernmental coalition facilitating the redesign of the interchange. But her outspokenness had been increasingly considered unhelpful and reactionary by some of her colleagues.

For months, McClellan had argued vehemently that one idea being floated — diverting some of Arapahoe Road's congestion onto other streets via a new highway underpass — would destroy some of the neighborhoods she represents.

The councilmember further complained that many of her District 3 constituents were not informed of such proposals and that "public buy-in" used to solicit federal funding had been sold under false assumptions.

By the night of the meeting on Feb. 8, 2010, McClellan had had it. She chided Zelenok for not informing the council of his plans to travel to Washington, D.C., on the matter that month — especially since she was a coalition representative at the time the trip was scheduled.

"That's a perfect example of the transparency we're not getting," McClellan said angrily, noting that she had heard about the meeting informally from an interested constituent.

As she spoke, McClellan was serving her final evening as Centennial's representative on the I-25 coalition. The council voted 6-3 that night to remove her.

Power struggle

In a council-manager form of government, an elected part-time city council hires a full-time city manager and city attorney to manage the city staff and the city's legal affairs respectively.

In Centennial's case, the mayor, who is elected at large, chairs the council meetings and has an equal vote with the other eight councilmembers.

Although a council is designed to be a big-picture political body and the city manager is generally entrusted to run the day-to-day operations, there can be shades of gray in a city's organizational structure.

For more than a year, Centennial has seen its share of conflict as elected officials and staff have struggled over communication, autonomy, public expressions of opinion and the chain of command.

Last June to improve efficiencies, a majority of council voted to give new authority to the city manager. The powers included setting the city's personnel and purchasing policies. The council must still ratify the manager's policy decisions.

The 6-2 vote with one member absent came after the council stopped short of plans to grant the manager even broader authority to set policy and make large spending decisions unilaterally.

Under the previous system, many proposed expenditures had taken months of meetings and procedural votes to approve. Adding to the cumbersome process had been disagreements between

the part-time council and the full-time specialists on staff.

"Sometimes we get crosswise," City Manager Jacque Wedding-Scott said. "It's difficult because hired professionals tend to believe they know the right direction to go. Then you have policy makers that are hearing from constituents with all kinds of push and pull."

Wedding-Scott has been among the chief advocates for streamlining the city manager's authority. She has argued that larger council involvement slows efficiencies and overburdens the notoriously long council meetings.

McClellan has publicly sparred with Wedding-Scott and Zelenok over that issue and others and has been the most outspoken Centennial councilmember to resist recent efforts to grant the city manager broader authority.

"Elected officials are supposed to have their hands on the steering wheel. The staff is supposed to carry out the orders," she said. "The people who suffer are the people who are counting on elected officials to be their voice."

A staff member, unlike a councilmember, cannot be removed by a special election, for example, McClellan emphasized.

The resistance to staff authority has created odd bedfellows. McClellan, a Democrat who unsuccessfully ran for Arapahoe County commissioner last year, is often aligned with District 2's Sue Bosier, a Republican precinct leader and the only councilmember to routinely back McClellan on staff oversight.

Mayor Cathy Noon has been more moderate on such issues. Although she tempered her support for increasing the city manager's power, she is not sure that the part-time council is prepared to assume an active, micro-managerial position.

"We have people who don't even answer their e-mails," Noon said of some of her elected colleagues. "Does the city council really want to look at every single policy? I was elected to govern. I don't know that I have the time to run the buying policy for office supplies."

Disagreements over management philosophy are par for the course in city government, says Sam Mamet, executive director of the Colorado Municipal League, a nonprofit organization representing most of the state's cities and towns.

Mamet says 10-year-old Centennial is going through inevitable growing pains after codifying its government structure in a voter-approved home-rule charter in 2008.

"Every city is different in terms of council-staff relationships. There isn't a right way or a wrong way," he said. "Even with clarity in a city charter, you may still have tension because many of these things are driven by personality. It is what it is."

A brief history

In many ways, Centennial's civil strife is a byproduct of its early years of ad hoc problem solving.

Before Centennial ever had a city manager, founding Mayor Randy Pye served as its part-time chief executive, making daily decisions for volunteers and the city's shoestring staff of activists and quasi-professionals.

Even for some years after Centennial hired its first full-time executive, Pye remained a comparatively strong mayor by suburban council-manager standards.

"It was a different environment, no doubt about it," said Wedding-Scott, who came to Centennial as deputy city manager in 2007. "The mayor really managed the city. He would come in weekly and really direct day-to-day activities of the government."

Three events gradually changed all that — growth in city staff, the 2008 home-rule charter and term-limited Pye's departure from city government 18 months later. The charter created specific roles for the mayor and council and removed most of the lesser known powers a mayor has in a statutory city.

Personality was also at play in the young city. Pye, one of the 2001 incorporation's five founders and the only mayor the city had known, was often shown deference by other councilmembers and staff who sometimes sought his informal approval of their decisions as late as 2008.

Longtime city activist Sue Rosser, a member of the Centennial Charter Commission that finalized the city officials' roles in the home-rule charter, thinks the constitution-like document and Pye's departure have changed the game considerably

"I don't think the staff [under Pye] did anything that was in disharmony with what Randy would do," she said.

Rosser thinks the charter has effectively required a greater level of involvement from the part-time council, which relies on full-time city employees for much of the information it uses to formulate policy.

"The trained and well-paid staff writes a report on an issue," Rosser said. "If you have council people who are not strong, they're just going to go with the staff report. It takes more guts and more knowledge to disagree with the staff report than it does to just go along."

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