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Unfilled City Manager Posts Hint at Future Gap

By [RALPH BLUMENTHAL](#)

TECUMSEH, Okla. — Bent over a yellow 1969 Camaro Super Sport, David Johnson said he much preferred restoring muscle cars to solving his neighbors' utility and garbage woes as Tecumseh's city manager.

"It's too political," said Mr. Johnson, 36, a former state inspector who quit City Hall in December after voters elected a new mayor and council members he regarded as hostile.

Add Tecumseh, a central [Oklahoma](#) community of 6,490, to the list of municipalities around the country searching for a city manager.

Fractionous politics and disdain for government, the limits of small-town life and pay, and the aging of baby boomers traditionally drawn to civic careers are making the job harder to fill, even as communities increasingly turn to such professional administrators to oversee budgets, services and personnel.

The shrinking pool of recruits is a forerunner of what some experts call a broader government talent shortage to come. With the bulging postwar generation nearing its retirement years, statisticians forecast a growing gap of unfilled executive and managerial jobs.

The effects are only beginning to be felt nationally, according to the International City/County Management Association, which has held regional conferences on what it deems a crisis. The number of American communities that are having trouble finding a city manager is not known, the association says, but at any given time several dozen may be advertising openings, and the listings are expected to rise sharply in coming years.

Frank Benest, a veteran city manager in Palo Alto, Calif., is working to recruit a new generation of managers in the face of what he calls a "demographic tsunami": far more managers planning to retire than young people to replace them. Whenever city managers get together for conferences, said Mr. Benest, 57, "all you see is gray hair."

Statistics bear him out. In 1971, according to the international management association, only 5 percent of city and county managers were aged 51 to 60. By 2002, the category had grown to 43 percent.

Would-be city managers have no special course of study, though about 300 colleges offer master's degrees in public administration, public management, public affairs or public policy. About 60 percent of city managers have master's degrees, many in business administration. But while the association's figures show a marked increase in the average salary of a city manager — to \$97,075 in 2005 from \$75,675 in 1999 — higher pay for school and hospital administrators lures many potential applicants away.

Oklahoma has been hit particularly hard, with at least 14 communities in search of a manager, some for years, according to the Oklahoma Municipal League, a nonprofit government assistance group.

Alice, Tex., an oil and cattle town of 20,000 west of Corpus Christi, also has a help-wanted sign out for a city manager, and Charlotte, N.C., is beginning a search after its longtime manager, Pam Seyfert, announced her retirement. Charlotte's job pays \$193,000, for running a city of 660,000 with 6,000 employees and a budget of \$1.5 billion.

Tecumseh, 40 miles southeast of Oklahoma City and named for the Shawnee Indian chief, has seen some turnover since a city manager with 10 years' tenure left in 1993 to take a better-paying position in nearby Seminole. His successor retired in 2001. The manager who followed him lasted a year before being sued on grounds of sexual harassment and resigning. Mr. Johnson, who had been that manager's rival for the job, was then offered it and accepted, at \$43,000 a year.

Mr. Johnson, a native Oklahoman and certified public accountant who had spent 11 years as an investigator in the Oklahoma Office of the State Auditor and Inspector, said he had been drawn to Tecumseh for its good schools and hunting and fishing. He said that he had gotten along well with the part-time mayor and council but that spending for infrastructure improvements had set people to grumbling over the budget.

After discovering that the city had spent \$400,000 in fuel cost adjustments that should have been paid by utility customers, he said, he billed them accordingly. And he said that when he privatized garbage collection, the former city sanitation chief rallied an opposition slate that won the November election.

"If I had to put issues in a nutshell, it was resistance to change," Mr. Johnson said. "I could see the new council coming in and taking three steps back."

Mr. Johnson, whose salary had grown to \$60,000 and was to rise to \$63,000 in 2007, opted to leave, blaming not only politics but also a punishing schedule. "You can't go to the grocery store, cafe or convenience store without someone telling you they have a leak in the front yard or a pothole in their driveway," he said.

He also said the new administration had cold-shouldered him. "I made it pretty known if they visited with me I'd be happy to consider staying," he said.

The new mayor, John Collier, a retired Air Force master sergeant and Baptist pastor, denied any hostility and said Mr. Johnson had seemed bent on leaving to work on muscle cars. "He was doing that while he was city manager," Mr. Collier said.

Joanne Medley, the city clerk and treasurer, is advertising widely for a new city manager, but only five résumés have arrived.

Communities that are only now gravitating toward a city manager form of government are bumping up against the tough realities. Perry, a northern Oklahoma city of 5,000, voted in November for such a change, leaving Mayor Jill Zimmer wondering how to fill the job, and at what cost.

“It is a small pool,” Ms. Zimmer said, “and it seems to be shrinking all the time.”

The trend has been a leading topic at the international management association, based in Washington.

“The local government management profession is at a crossroads,” the association says on its Web site, www.icma.org. “The baby boomers that comprise the majority of local government managers are approaching retirement at a quickening pace, while a much smaller group of young professionals and new career entrants are in line and prepared to fill their shoes.”

With up to 20 million fewer people in the generation following the boomers, the group said, the competition for talent “is likely to be fierce and global in nature.”

Smaller communities are at a particular disadvantage, said Michele Frisby, a spokeswoman for the association. With two-income households now common, more professionals seek opportunities in larger communities where a spouse can find work too, Ms. Frisby said.

Mr. Benest, the Palo Alto city manager, said his generation had been drawn to public service by President [John F. Kennedy](#)’s 1961 inaugural appeal: “Ask what you can do for your country.” Now, he said, the challenge is to inspire a new generation.

“The good news is, if you do research, they do want to contribute to their country,” Mr. Benest said. “But they don’t make a connection between their values and working for the government, so they work for nonprofits or volunteer.”

As bleak as the future looks to some practitioners, Thomas W. Finnie, 65, who retired in April after 16 years as city manager of Springfield, Mo., said he believed the market would provide the solution.

“There’s a hell of a lot of cities,” Mr. Finnie said, “and they’re not going away. As the supply of managers goes down, the money goes up.”

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