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Bellevue City Manager Quitting -- Exit Is Amid Talk Of Low Morale

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BELLEVUE

The manager of the state's fifth-largest city has abruptly resigned, saying the **Bellevue** City Council's desire to have him usher several long-term projects to completion did not fit well with his hope to retire soon.

But **Steve**

Bauer's decision this week left many at City Hall wondering if his respected financial acumen could not disguise a prickly personal style that many say has contributed to low morale and an exodus of city employees.

Bauer's resignation will be effective Saturday. In a brief interview yesterday, **Bauer**, who has been city manager since August 1995, said the city would be better served by him stepping aside sooner rather than later.

The City Council tapped Deputy City Manager Linda Barton as interim city manager.

Bauer, 54, said he had planned to take early retirement.

"I've had a history of people in my family dropping dead at age 55," he said. He began thinking about retiring sooner than planned after the first half of his annual evaluation last week, he said.

"In our discussions during my evaluation, it became clear that my desire to retire in the next year would prove disruptive to some of the ongoing city initiatives," **Bauer** wrote in his resignation, submitted at the second half of his performance review Monday.

Bauer, who will receive seven months' pay and some other benefits in severance, said he planned on doing consulting work. His salary this year, with bonus, was \$123,000.

Bauer's work was praised by many.

"Under Steve's leadership," Mayor Mike Creighton wrote in an e-mail to city staffers yesterday, "the city achieved an AAA (bond) rating by Moody's, one of only a handful of cities of our size in the country to receive the investment firm's highest rating."

Creighton also lauded Bauer's financial and management skills.

Councilwoman Connie Marshall pointed to Bauer's efforts to set aside up to \$23 million to pay for eventual medical costs of police and fire department retirees.

"He wasn't the type of person to play politics, which is a very desirable trait in a city manager," said Councilman Kurt Springman. "He was also very good for the council in that he would play devil's advocate and bring up a lot of (issues) that the council didn't recognize. . . . That's very valuable."

But Bauer's strength has been his intellect - not interpersonal relationships, many employees said.

After averaging 54 departures a year through the early 1990s, this city of 1,100 employees lost 96 people last year - many of them longtime, high-ranking staffers. That number is expected to rise this year. A large number cited **Bauer** as one reason they left. And in a "core values" poll last spring, many complained they didn't feel the city manager trusted or respected them.

"He was often a brilliant man to work with," one staffer said, echoing a common sentiment, "but that doesn't mean he was easy to get along with."

"I think there are a lot of issues in terms of morale within the organization," **Bauer** allowed, adding that the city had begun to address those.

In recent weeks, at Bauer's suggestion, an executive consultant was brought in to deal with some management issues, Creighton said. But the mayor described that move as "the normal course of doing business."

Although the council was surprised by Bauer's resignation, the mayor denied that its timing spoke to larger management troubles at City Hall.

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"The reality of it is," Creighton said, "we came to an agreement to go our own ways. You're going to have to come to your own conclusions."

Bauer

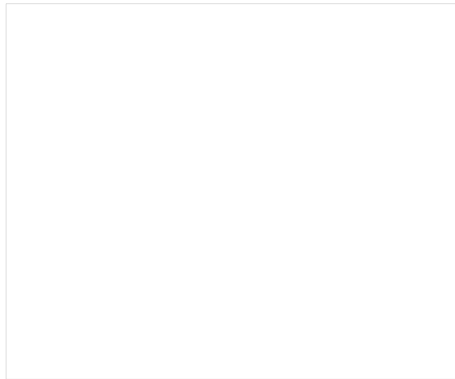
became Bellevue's seventh city manager since the city's incorporation in 1953. He has a nearly 30-year history of public service. Before his arrival, he served nine years in Portland as director of finance and administration.

A national search for a replacement will take "a minimum of four to five months," Creighton said.

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