

Ontario City Council
League of Women Voters of Mt. Baldy Area
Observer Report by Charles G. Ferrell
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The Ontario City Council includes five members, a Mayor and four city council members, all elected at large by the voters in Ontario. There are no council districts. A majority of the City Council (each of the five members has one vote) sets the policies and direction of the Ontario City Government, which is then administered by the City Manager who is hired by and reports directly to the city council.

CITY LEADERSHIP

The City Council includes Mayor Paul S. Leon, Mayor Pro Tem Ruben Valencia and Council Members Alan D. Wapner, Jim W. Bowman, and Debra Dorst-Porada. The top City officials include City Manager Scott Ochoa, City Attorney John E. Brown, City Clerk Sheila Mautz and Treasurer James R. Millhiser.

The City Council meets the first and third Tuesdays of the month at 6 p.m. in Council Chambers at Ontario City Hall, 303 East B Street in Ontario. I have been attending meetings, off and on, on behalf of the League of Women Voters since August 2017. When I was Editor of the Chino Champion and South Ontario News in the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, I attended many Ontario City Council meetings and watched many more on the Local Access TV Channel in my home at the time in Creekside in South Ontario.

OBSERVATIONS

I noted in last year's League of Women Voters report that the City of Ontario had gone through some challenging times in recent years, much of that related to the decline of Ontario International Airport, which had been under the control of Los Angeles International Airport and the City of Los Angeles for a number of years and allowed to decline during those years. After a great deal of negotiations, including gaining support of other cities and governmental agencies in the Ontario region, an Ontario International Airport Authority, including City and other regional leaders, was formed and that agency now controls the airport grounds. Of course, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is 100 percent in charge of flight patterns, which many Ontario residents, who are concerned over changes in flight patterns that result in increased noise above certain neighborhoods, still do not understand. As a result, the once declining airport, now under local business control, is gaining additional carriers. In addition, as the only international airport in Southern California with room to expand, it is expanding. The expansion itself has limited positive impact on the City, but the real benefit of the airport growth to the City is the boom in the economy in the general vicinity of the airport. The City is also benefitting from a thriving Convention Center and Arena, which is now hosting a National Basketball Association "G-League" team, operated by the Los Angeles Clippers as well as a Minor League hockey team, owned by the Los Angeles Kings. Ontario, as were many California cities, was hurt when the State, under then Gov. Jerry Brown, confiscated all Redevelopment Agency (RDA) funds in order to balance the State budget (for one year). Cities such as Ontario which were successfully operating an RDA lost many opportunities to upgrade areas. In Ontario, these included a deteriorating downtown and the area around Holt Boulevard between downtown and the airport. In addition, 20% of RDA funds were going towards low cost housing and losing those funds slowed growth in that area for Ontario. I reported last year the city appeared poised to tackle those and other areas of need, with a City Council that certainly seems to be on the same page

with its City Manager Scott Ochoa, who was new last year and was in the process of restructuring and reorganizing the city hall staff and departments. That process is going very well, and the City Council and City staff appear to be all on board behind this city manager.

City Council meetings are run very professionally by the City Council and the City Manager. Members arrive on time, the meetings start on time; those who wish to speak, fill out request cards and most presentations by the public are pithy and respectful while the council members act in the same manner. Speakers are limited to three minutes and are verbally warned by the City Clerk when they have one-minute left. The verbal warning sometimes startles a speaker and causes a loss of their train of thought. Many cities and agencies use a green, yellow and red light. The yellow light warns them when a minute or 30 seconds was left, which makes the process run more smoothly.

The City Council agendas are plentiful and available at the door of Council chambers. The Council members appear to have done their homework on the issues and ask well-thought-out questions of staff. This City Council is no different from many others in that many items go on the Consent Calendar (in which all items are passed at one time by a single vote without any comment) which probably do need some public airing, such as purchases for a million dollars or a multi-million-dollar grant the City has received. Doing that would improve the transparency of the Council meetings and better inform the public what is going on in their city. There have been no problems, however, in pulling items off the consent calendar when requested by a Council member, staff or member of the public. The Council could make it clearer every meeting that anyone, including a member of the public, can request an item be pulled from Consent Calendar and discussed.

A suggestion regarding the agendas, the abbreviated ones at the door for the public, would be to include the staff recommendation. This bit of transparency would make it easier for members of the public to prepare before they speak on the issue.

Although the meetings follow good government standards and are professionally run, at times it isn't very clear how each member voted on a particular issue. Many other councils and agencies have a board with the Council members' names and lights so the public could see how each member voted on each issue, so that voting is more transparent.

Public attendance at City Council meetings is sparse, except for staff which pack a section of the seating area (the area which appears on camera behind speakers, during the Governmental Channel Cable TV broadcasts). If the City put those broadcasts on the official City Website, members of the public could access them around the clock on their computers. When a member of the public has a question, the Mayor turns the matter over to the City Manager who directs a member of the staff to step out into the lobby to meet with the member of the public and work on a solution. This moves the meeting forward in a timely manner.

What is very important with this current City Council is that, if there are personal and/or professional differences between or among them, it doesn't show during the meetings.

CONCLUSION

This current Ontario City Council appears to be operating well as a team and the meetings are well run in a professional manner. Members of the public, the few who do attend, are virtually all courteous and the Council members respond accordingly. Overall, since I have been observing Ontario City Council Meetings, based on the criteria I have read from the League of Women Voters and the 40-plus years I

worked as a newspaper reporter, including 30 years as a community newspaper editor (and during which time I lived in Ontario and edited the South Ontario News community newspaper), Ontario is in a good place right now and poised to move forward in an even more positive direction.