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Correction Appended

SECTION: LOCAL; Pg. B01

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HEADLINE: Builders see hope in change;

BANNING: With three top officials leaving, they foresee a different attitude at City Hall.

BYLINE: STEVE FETBRANDT; THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

BODY:

BANNING

Local businessman Marc Hendon says he worries about the loss of continuity that may come with the recent staffing upheaval at Banning City Hall.

Still, Hendon, owner [SEE CORRECTION] of the Hendon Building in downtown Banning, and other local businesspeople and developers say the departure of longtime city Planning Director Roger Derda, City Attorney John Wilson and the imminent retirement of Vicky Burt, the city's director of community and economic development, could help Banning out of its economic doldrums.

City Manager Randy Anstine has chalked up the exodus of the three city officials to routine attrition.

Some business leaders, such as Gary Carlton, owner of Patio Concepts on the east end of Ramsey Street, accused the City Hall trio of outright unfriendliness toward developers and business owners.

Carlton, who wants to be the master developer for the east end of town, said Derda, Burt and Wilson were reactive, rather than proactive, and often found reasons to say no to projects instead of ways to expedite them. The logjam that resulted at City Hall, he said, frustrated many applicants into taking their plans and ideas elsewhere.

Derda and Wilson could not be reached for comment this week. But Burt defended her work over the past five years and said there are many reasons Banning has lagged behind neighboring Beaumont in new development.

"You have to understand that development is its own industry and we have a lot of laws, like the California Environmental Quality Act, that govern it," she said. "I have a responsibility to be judicious in what I do. Sometimes individuals see that as an impediment."
BACKLOG OF WORK

Andy Marocco, president of All American Racing of Rialto, which is building the first professional quarter-mile drag strip in Southern California in 33 years next to Banning Municipal Airport, said the City Hall turnover "is a great thing for all developers."

"What this shake-up shows is that now this city will be perceived as wanting to work with developers to stimulate the local economy," said Marocco. His project was nearly three years in the city approval process. "I expect that the projects that are already on the table right now will be expedited and developed and come to fruition, and that that will set the standard for future businesses.

"It hasn't been a secret the last couple of years there have been holdups with projects, and with ours in particular," he said. "We've even had to go bypass staff and go directly to the City Council to have certain issues resolved."

While Burt declined to discuss specific individuals and projects, she said no developer gets everything it wants.

"Sometimes the answer to the customer in front of you has to be 'No,' " she said. "It's the responsibility of the people in the public sector to uphold the law and protect the unseen customer, the community."

Burt said physical and market constraints also have kept Banning from growing at the same pace as Beaumont.

"Look at the natural geography and the natural progression of development. Which community is further west?" she said. "Growth in the Pass is coming from the west, not the east. Also, look at how the two communities straddle Interstate 10 and at the developable land between the interstate and the transportation corridors."

Steven Frates, senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, characterized Burt's arguments as specious.

"Hers is one view," he said. "From what I've seen of the area, there is plenty of developable land in both cities. There's also a lot of development that has leap-frogged communities in the Inland Empire."

Burt said she spent much of her time laying the foundation for future growth, including expansion of the city's redevelopment project area to include most of Ramsey Street.

"Each city approaches it (growth and development) based on what their constituents are telling them they want," she said. "There may be some people who don't understand that process or are working in a different framework."
LOOKING AHEAD

What the staffing turnover ultimately bodes for Banning only time

will tell. Critics said it should put a more pro-growth face on City Hall at the very least.

"From what I've seen, Beaumont is much friendlier to work with," Hendon said. "In the past, I've asked (Banning) city officials for something to be done about a certain situation and you never hear back."

Ernie Egger, planning director in neighboring Beaumont, said he does not know how Banning's staffing changes will play out.

"We just don't pay that close of attention to what's going on there," he said. "But I do think attitude (inside City Hall) is very important

"People who come to Beaumont have a reasonable degree of certainty of what's going to fly and what's not going to fly. That's what the development community really likes. Uncertainty is the killer. If there is uncertainty and lack of clear direction, developers won't stick around."

Betty De Santis, who joined the Banning Planning Commission in January, said she expects the changes to breathe new life into the city.

"This could really be an opportunity for great things to happen," she said. "When you get new planning people, a new city attorney and a new redevelopment person, you're going to get fresh ideas."

Frates said it is unlikely the city will experience problems processing existing or new development applications while the city recruits replacement department heads.

CORRECTION-DATE: July 27, 2004

CORRECTION:

The owner of the Hendon Building on Ramsey Street was incorrect in a story Saturday about future development in Banning. The owner is Sylvia Hendon. (D)

LOAD-DATE: August 3, 2004

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