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WATKINS AIMS TO UPDATE CITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

COLUMBIA, Mo. – Bill Watkins says he has some big shoes to fill when he takes over in January as Columbia's new city manager.

The assistant city manager since December 1995, Watkins officially takes the reins January 7 from Ray Beck, who held the city manager post for 20 years.

"I think he has done an awful, awful, awful lot of things right," Watkins said. "One of the things I hold him up for is managing the fiscal affairs of the city. They are in excellent shape, and he's got systems in place to really ensure that it stays that way. I certainly want to build on that."

However, Watkins recognizes that Columbia is growing city and needs to operate more like a big city rather than a small town. "Ray's systems are based on a person who intimately knows all of the work of the city, its buildings and streets – he can even tell you where the sewer lines are," he said. "His management system is built on a lot of personal knowledge, which works well for him. I think the system is getting strained because so many new areas are being built that the city manager cannot afford to be personally involved in all of them."

Watkins said he intends his first priority to be improved communication with the city's employees, residents and constituent groups such as developers, environmental groups, Boone County and independent service providers such as the sewer district. For instance, he said he plans to make better use of the city's neighborhood associations as two-way communication conduits between residents and the city council and staff.

"You've got to be able to tell them 'Hey, this is what's going on, this is what's being planned, here are some things we're thinking about,' and then you've got to be able to have a system where you can sit down and listen to them," he said.

He also plans to improve communication and cooperation between the city and other government entities, such as state agencies and the legislature. He especially wants to work to improve the city's relationship with Boone County government. "We're not always going to see things eye to eye; we come from slightly different perspectives," he said. "As an example, we're working on trying to develop a policy for joint maintenance of roads, particularly where a road is

part in and part out of the city.”

Regular communication would help smooth jurisdictional issues as the city continues to grow, he said, and suggests that the two governments could cooperate on such items as development projects. Operation of the Boone County Fairgrounds is one possible cooperative venture discussed in public recently. Above all, he said, the city needs to understand that, unlike the city council, the county commission has a dual responsibility to act as both legislators and administrators. “I would like to meet at a regularly scheduled public meeting with the county commission on a regular basis,” he said. “I think the more we do these kinds of things, the more comfortable we are going to be with each other.”

Watkins returned to Columbia in July 1988 as the city’s director of economic development and executive vice president of Regional Economic Development Inc., or REDI, after serving as city manager of Wood River, Illinois, and Newton Falls, Ohio. He earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in 1974 and 1976 at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Because of his extensive background in economic development, Watkins says one of the most important aspects of Columbia is its vibrant economy and understands the importance of keeping it strong.

“I think a town is kind of like a business in that it kind of needs to continually update and refresh itself because the market and the environment that happen around it changed,” he said. “I think that the future of Columbia, particularly its economics, is a lot going to be tied to the university, the research park that’s now beginning to take place, and the incubator. These are things that REDI’s been advocating since its first master plan 17 years ago. It’s finally happening. Maybe the stars are finally in line.”

Watkins also wants to see more manufacturing enterprises in Columbia, but they may be manufacturing facilities that focus on products in the life sciences arena, such as the production of vaccines. “Not everybody in this town is going to be able to go to college, so we’ve got to find good paying jobs for people with other skills,” he said. “You can’t put all your eggs in one basket.”

Attracting such businesses doesn’t necessarily mean providing more incentives, he said. “My feeling on incentives is that you never say never,” he said. “I don’t think there’s a rule of thumb that you need to be providing gobs of incentives. Now, if the absolute right kind of company wanted to come to Columbia, and we needed to do something to make that happen, then that should be something we publicly discuss and consider doing.”

In regard to city operations, Watkins plans to focus on coordination between city departments. “I really hate it when one department is saying one thing and another is saying something else,” he said.

Watkins also believes city planning needs serious work, especially in regard to streets. “We’re so far behind the planning curve, it’s absurd,” he said. “I don’t think we really know what our population is or what our demographics are.”

Watkins wants Columbia to be a place where people want to live, do business and raise families – he and his wife, Kathy, have four children, for instance. He would like for the city to do some community “visioning” about what kind of place we want Columbia to be. “I think we all want it to be a very vibrant community, and that means livable with a vibrant economy, a place that people want to come and call home.”

When cities create artificial barriers to growth in the central city, he said, satellite communities start to sprout around the periphery. “We have got to remember that much of the economy of our community is based on the City of Columbia,” he said. “We don’t want to do anything long-term to kill the golden goose.”
