

Efficiency report represents a challenge, and an opportunity

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Body

It was more than a strongly worded letter to Petersburg city officials.

A leading nonprofit group has asked City Council members to resign if they are not fully committed to reforming city government. The letter also states that City Manager B. David Canada is not the person able to lead the transformation of city government.

The letter, in effect, is a vote of no confidence in the leadership of city government.

The Dec. 16 letter was written by Greg Werkheiser, executive director of The Phoenix Project, to Mayor Annie Mickens. The letter was approved by the board of directors of The Phoenix Project. The nonprofit group has done more than 150 projects in the city with the help of more than 350 volunteers.

The nonprofit group, and scores of citizens at a Dec. 15 public meeting, have expressed frustration that the city has not forcefully responded to the efficiency review released in August by consultants Berkshire Advisors.

The report, at a cost of \$150,000, says without fundamental transformation government, the city will continue to face a "downward spiral." The report says the city is lacking in a long-term economic development plan, the administration structure does not work, and there is no transparency or accountability in city government.

In his letter, Werkheiser provides some recommendations of his own and asks for a private citizen-led task-force to provide guidance on how to implement key findings of the efficiency review. Werkheiser calls for, among other things the release of memos from city staff containing scenarios for the implementation of the efficiency review and use of the school system phone tree to provide notice of the next public meeting.

He goes on to say in the letter "this places front and center the question raised by the Study: whether top City staff, on whose long watch the dysfunctional conditions have manifest, are the appropriate persons to lead the City through transformational change."

The letter was bold and a risk to the Phoenix Project, which wishes to still work with the city. But The Phoenix Project sees the report as a unique opportunity to improve how the city operates and that will benefit everyone from residents to nonprofit groups working in the city.

The city administration is scheduled to release its response to the efficiency report during the City Council meeting on Jan. 20. That is a positive development, although it comes on the same day most city residents will be paying more attention to the inauguration of Barack Obama as the nation's first African-American president.

Sarah Curtis

Efficiency report represents a challenge, and an opportunity

We look forward to the city administration's response to the report findings and hope that city officials show a level of commitment to improve city government wherever possible.

In the long term, city officials -- especially City Council members -- need to address the issues raised in the efficiency report. Working toward improving city government and articulating the effort toward better government is critical for the long-term future of Petersburg.

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