

Published: 05/07/2007

The legacy of John Bell - for now

The end of the John Bell mayoral era in Gloucester does not mean the end of hard times for the city.

Predictably, the mayor's announcement that he will not seek a fourth term is getting mixed reviews - it is good news to his critics and bad news to his many supporters.

But those on the anti side of the Bell divide should be realistic enough to know that his departure will not mark a profound improvement in Gloucester's fortunes. The city's needs vastly outstrip its resources, and that will not change no matter who is the mayor. The city's property owners are exhausted by taxes and fees, and that is not going to change in the near future. The city will, for the next several years, have to cope with the disruption of a major infrastructure project in the downtown.

Indeed, while Bell has not been perfect as mayor, he has confronted multiple challenges with good grace, and made progress on a number of fronts.

He came into office at a difficult time - early in his tenure the world, the nation and the economy changed with the disaster of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He presided during a time when, because of the economic decline, state aid to cities and towns did not increase the way it did during the 1990s. He inherited from previous administrations the troubles with the city's sewer system that are only now being fixed.

And during his nearly six years, there have been multiple successes. He led the effort, all the way to Washington, to keep the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration headquarters in Gloucester, and succeeded. He worked to help the fishing industry survive under the pressure of suffocating federal regulation. The industry has not revived, but at least Gloucester fishermen are due to receive \$12 million in mitigation money from the companies planning to put liquified natural gas terminals off the coast.

Bell's care and promotion of the city's rich heritage prompted First Lady Laura Bush to cite Gloucester as a model for preservation. Under his watch, the nearly derelict central commuter rail station has been transformed into a healthy center of commerce. And the downtown, especially the east end, has improved under his administration.

His major flaw has been a reluctance to confront difficult issues where, inevitably, not everybody will go away from the table satisfied. Such situations have made him seem weak and uncertain, and when people sense that in a leader, they are less willing to follow when the going gets tough.

Bell suspended deputy fire chief Miles Schlichte, but then rescinded it when Schlichte wanted the hearing on his suspension held in public. He has still not confronted ongoing poor management in the police department.

Nor has he shown firm leadership on the city's sewer policy, ranging from what sorts of private extensions should be allowed to whether the city should keep a promise made a decade ago to subsidize a portion of betterment costs.

A promised community health center has yet to appear. Nor has a local radio communications system.

But, on balance, Bell can hold his head high when he leaves office. And those who are lining up to succeed him should learn from his experience. It is easy to make promises outside of the corner office, where there is no pressure and where everything looks simple. It is much harder from the inside, where things are much more complicated, and the pressure is unrelenting.