

Does Mayor Dellums want his Job?

Contributed by Byron Williams
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"The handling of Edgerly looks like the typical bull manure they have come to expect from elected officials" Imagine for a moment you're the mayor of Oakland and you discovered that the city administrator has been accused of involving herself in an ongoing police investigation that centered on one of her relatives. How would you handle it?

Would you:

- A) Place the city administrator on administrative leave pending further investigation.
- B) Place the city administrator on administrative leave pending further investigation.
- C) Place the city administrator on administrative leave pending further investigation.
- D) Call a press conference to announce the city administrator will stay through July 31, maintaining the majority of her responsibilities. And assure a skeptical press that this deal was made months ago and has nothing to do with the current allegations.

If you chose A, B, or C there may be a future for you as an elected official. If, however, you chose D, you might want to consider a remedial course in leadership.

But D was the unfortunate selection made this week by Oakland Mayor, Ron Dellums. My example no doubt exaggerates the situation; there are probably reasons behind the scenes that necessitate City Administrator, Deborah Edgerly being granted a graceful departure in lieu of being placed immediately on administrative leave.

Dellums took no questions during his brief press conference indicating that his responsibility lied only with Edgerly and not the public. How does this look to the people of Oakland, who had high hopes when Dellums was elected?

To the average Oakland resident the handling of Edgerly looks like the typical bull manure they have come to expect from elected officials that leads to disenchantment and political apathy.

People may not always understand the process that takes a building from proposal stage before the Planning Commission to actual construction, but they fully understand nepotism and accusations that a city employee intervened in an ongoing police investigation. And most know they would not be afforded the same treatment, as was Edgerly this week.

But underneath the Edgerly affair is the persistent perception, since taking office, that the mayor does not possess the requisite leadership skills that the city needs.

How one views political leadership is similar to how one views the economy. If one feels good about the economy they are more apt to make purchases with their discretionary income. If not, they are more apt to tighten their belts. But it is based on how one feels.

I would not suggest there has not been progress under the Dellums administration, but does it feel like political leadership? The answer to that question is key, especially if the ongoing investigation in the Edgerly matter reveals yet uncovered embarrassing facts for the city.

The problems of Oakland require active participation between local government as well as community stakeholders. But the mayor has offered the city a leadership style that feels more like benevolence.

This benevolence even includes the City Council. Several City Council members have gone on the record with their frustrations of the mayor's office. Councilman Larry Reid stated last week, "We've (city council) been totally out of the loop...I think there is a sense of all of us being frustrated."

As someone said to me this week, "The sense I get is that he doesn't want to be in the job and he has an attitude that everyone should just be thankful that he took it on and leave him alone."

Can the mayor turn around these perceptions? Certainly. Does he want to? Only the mayor can answer that. But with each passing day, his failure to answer is itself a response.

I can write columns urging the mayor to have a more visible presence in the community, his staff can make similar recommendations, but only the mayor can decide if he is comfortable with the current perception of his lacking political leadership.

Defining political leadership can be difficult; it's one of those nebulous things that can often escape words. But just as the Supreme Court defined pornography, you know political leadership when you see it.

Maybe more important, you also know when you don't see it.