

The history of City Managers in Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 27, 2010)

Oak Ridge City Council has just hired Mark S. Watson, former city administrator in Yuma, Arizona, as our next City Manager. His tenure begins August 9, 2010, and he has been appointed to a three-year term.

Our last City Manager, James R. O'Connor, resigned January 8, 2010. Gary Cinder, Public Works Director, has served as Interim City Manager beginning January 9, 2010, and will continue until August 8, 2010. This is not the first time Gary has filled in for the City Manager's position. He also served us in that capacity from May 10, 2003 until March 14, 2004.

Thanks to Jackie Bernard, who is the person I think of when I have a question about any aspect of Oak Ridge City Government history, the following history of City Managers in Oak Ridge is provided. Jackie's history begins on June 16, 1959, when Lewis B. Shallcross, Jr., was appointed temporary city Manager.

Shallcross was to serve until his "successor was qualified." He had been appointed as Administrative Assistant to the Advisory Town Council on April 14, 1958. Following incorporation and election of the Oak Ridge City Council, he was appointed temporary City Manager and served until November 1, 1959.

But even before this transition from Advisory Town Council to City Council and from Administrative Assistant to City Manager, there had been years of preparation for this day and for this transition. Fred C. Peitzsch managed that process as "City Manager" for what was not really even an official "city."

I was delighted to find an article written by Dick Smyser in his "Editor's License" column on June 8, 2004, where he featured Peitzsch and the unusual and "crucial" role (according to Dick), he played in the transition of Oak Ridge from being dependent on the federal government for all services to a municipality incorporated under state law...not an easy or even a wanted transition for most who lived in Oak Ridge.

Here is Dick's article, titled, "He coached Oak Ridge to self-government":

"For eight years crucial to the future of self-government in Oak Ridge, Fred C. Peitzsch was 'City Manager' for what was not really a city. That is until, during those years, he would play a critical role in making it one.

"As the primary U.S. Atomic Energy Commission person assigned to wean 30,000 residents from federal dependency and convince at least a majority of them that they should form a municipality incorporated under state law, his was an unprecedented and often seemingly impossible mission.

"Immediately on taking over direction of the nation's nuclear establishment in 1946 from the World War II-created military Manhattan Engineer District, the AEC announced plans to, first, maintain the three communities born of the wartime nuclear effort, of which Oak Ridge was the largest. Next, AEC would assist these communities in working toward independence from federal authority and dependence on federal funds to finance their streets and highways, police and fire protection and, most important, schools.

"Residents very much wanted independence from federal authority over community decision making. Their desire for financial independence, however, was tempered by the cost. The MED and now the AEC had been providing services well above the level of comparable neighboring communities. Quality services had been part of the plan to induce high level scientific personnel, in particular, to work and live here. But now it was time to get real.

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"Peitzsch was dead center amidst these tensions, prime target for residents angry about increases in the quite moderate rents they paid for homes and apartments, then all still government-owned and administered. Upset also about the end of the free bus service they had enjoyed from the city's first years.

"Simultaneous with these unsettling changes, it fell to Peitzsch to work closely with citizens who were themselves making efforts to move to self-government. His job was to both support and explain the AEC's changing policies and assist as these citizens wrote a city charter and, in time, worked out a plan for orderly home sale. In March 1953, unwisely in retrospect, a charter for incorporation was put to a vote. It was soundly rejected and Peitzsh, feeling he had failed, submitted his resignation. Fortunately, it was not accepted.

"The lesson was: home sale should come first. Only as property owners would residents be willing to risk self-government. By 1957 the first homes were sold under a specially written law allowing the Fed to declare housing here surplus and then dispose of it to current residents rather than selling to the highest bidder as federal surplus had been sold up to that time.

"As Peitzsch assisted the writing of a new charter to replace the one rejected so soundly in 1953, the 'city manager' often had to play the villain, standing firm for AEC policy while citizens worked to thwart it. There were times when they did just that, going over the AEC's head to the Congress. One such instance was designating the new municipality's city limits.

"The AEC wanted Oak Ridgers to incorporate only the AEC-designated 'Minimum Geographic Area' - housing, schools and commercial facilities. Foresighted citizens, however, led effectively by the late Eugene Joyce, stood firm for incorporating the entire reservation, federal plant operations included - Y-12, Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the then still operating Oak Ridge Gaseous Diffusion Plant. These facilities might someday be basis for taxation, they argued. Further, the plants were an integral part of the creation and continued existence of the community.

"Peitzsch lost that battle for the AEC but, inscrutable as he often was, there was reason to speculate whether he was glad he lost. He was, after all, an Oak Ridge resident himself. He had married his wife, Pat, in 1951 soon after his arrival here. The couple has lived since with their two children in an original if significantly improved cemesto home on Orchard Lane while also tending to their beloved cattle farm in South Clinton.

"He was also much involved with community projects, active for the Emory Valley School, the Jaycees and Oak Ridge Civic Music Association. The extensive files he kept are unmatched for the wealth of information they contain on the evolution of self-government. I once asked his help compiling a record of all the 'expert' community studies contracted by the AEC, presumably to assist and enhance his efforts. The listing filled pages.

"Complementing his reserved manner was a subtle sense of humor. The Oak Ridger had difficulty spelling his name. He complained justifiably and recommended that we hang a large placard on our newsroom wall: P-E-I-T-Z-S-C-H. It hung there for years and we went through long periods without a misspelling.

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"I wish we had preserved that placard. Fred C. Peitzsch's role in leading, assisting, cajoling and sometimes necessarily pressuring citizens to take responsibility for their community was key to making Oak Ridge, now for 45 years, not just a historic but also a self-governing city. - RDS

Well, Dick, we are now six years further along and have hired us a new City Manager. Mark, I hope you appreciate the history of Oak Ridge and our unique transition from a war time reservation, reluctantly to a municipality. Maybe this quick look back will help you as you begin your time with us. I look forward to helping you further appreciate our history.

The other city managers have been: Fred E. Weisbrod, November 1, 1959 to November 17, 1961. He was followed by Charles H. Oakley, Finance Director, who served as Acting City Manager from November 17, 1961 to April 1, 1962.

Then Carleton E. McMullin served from April 1, 1962 to September 30, 1973. William N. Haddock, who was the Director of Administration, served as the Interim City manager from October 1, 1973 until his appointment as City Manager on December 16, 1974 and served until July 10, 1978.

Matthew Lyle, Lacy, III served from July 10, 1978 until May 5, 1986. Then Joseph C. King, Assistant City manager, served as Interim City Manager from May 5, 1986, until July 18, 1986, when he was followed by Michael W. Walker, Research and Budget Director who served as Interim City Manager from July 19, 1986, to October 8, 1986.

Jeffery J. Broughton was hired on October 8, 1986, and served until October 15, 1995. He was followed by Paul C. Boyer, Jr., Human Resources Director, who served as Interim City manager from October 16, 1995, to August 1, 1996.

Robert T. McDaniel, served from August 1, 1996, until December 15, 1999. He was replaced by Paul C. Boyer, Jr. who served from December 16, 1999 until May 9, 2003. And this brings our history of City Managers in Oak Ridge up to where Gary Cinder filled in the first time and then to James R. O'Connor, Gary again and now Mark S. Watson.

Best wishes, Mark...I truly hope to see what Tom Hayes described as his desire to see us "kick start the city on an upward spiral"...we could sure use one!



photo of Mark S. Watson