

OPINIONS

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Morrissey our pick for mayor



ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR FILE PHOTO

Larry Morrissey talks about his plans as Rockford mayor during an interview with the Register Star.

Independent deserves a second term

Independent candidate Larry Morrissey is the best choice for Rockford mayor. The Rockford Register Star Editorial Board unanimously endorses Morrissey, the incumbent, for a second term. Morrissey's first term has been a rocky one as the first-time politician learned the job. As a political outsider in his first term, Morrissey promised to shake things up in the entrenched city bureaucracy and he woefully underestimated how long it would take to move the community forward and to fix the "we-can't-do-that" mentality that impedes progress.

Progress from promise to implementation has too often been too slow. There have been flatfooted political moves that included a botched home rule attempt and two attempts to insert the mayor's office into the court system and the school district. The grueling labor negotiations with the police and firefighter unions have fostered a culture of us-against-him. Morrissey sometimes is so enamored with the rightness of his agenda that he forgets that others may not see things his way.

Morrissey gets the vision right. He always has. He knows where the city needs to go, and he knows how to get it there. His challenges in his first term are threefold: Convince the public to share his vision; overcome his inexperience and naiveté in government and politics; jettison his resistance to accepting and integrating advice from seasoned politicians and community leaders.

We expected his learning curve to be a steep one; it was. But, in the past year, the mayor increasingly has been able to blend successfully his vision with the strategies and action plans that will lead the community forward. He has not been afraid to make controversial decisions such as casting the deciding vote on the asphalt plant and supporting his embattled police chief. And, he learns from his missteps.

The best example is his decision to raise the city's sales tax for road repairs and eliminate the annual city vehicle sticker fee. The first time he proposed the increase, it was a top down effort with City Hall taking the lead. PowerPoint presentations led by City Hall staff did little to win support of voters.

When the referendum failed in the spring of 2006, Morrissey tried again, and the second time he built a citizens' coalition led

The challengers

◆ Democrat Doug Block, a retired police lieutenant, has taken a leave of absence from his job as a labor representative with the union that represents city police officers to run for mayor. We wonder whether Block can truly make difficult decisions that affect police and firefighters, who also endorsed him, if he is elected mayor. Block's lack of experience coupled with his significant conflicts of interest and his superficial plans for his potential administration lead us to believe he is interested primarily in sparring with Morrissey.

◆ Besides running for mayor, Republican John Harmon has played other political games. Harmon, a former Winnebago County Board

member, objected to the Republican Party's slating of Ed Geeser for 14th ward alderman on the grounds that the meeting to slate Geeser was improper. Harmon presided over that meeting. If Harmon starts fights within his own party, how can he be expected to work with Democrats and Independents if he's elected mayor? Harmon's antics are disrespectful and undermine the civic and civil political process. They smack of little more than those of a political hack.

◆ Green Party candidate Jesus Correa VII, by his own admission, is in over his head. We admire Correa for getting involved, but he is in no way qualified for elected office at this time.

by taxpayer advocate Ted Biundo. The sales tax passed April 17, 2007. Morrissey gets it. He's learning it. And, he is proving he can get the job done and done well in the face of daunting odds.

Rockford is not alone in its economic, identity and development struggles. He is leading the current budget negotiations with a smart and skillful approach that protects the city's residents and its services. He clearly understands that business as usual cannot be the foundation of a budget with an almost \$10 million gap. If the city does weather the recession well, it will not be because Morrissey failed.

Mother Nature has not been too kind to Morrissey's first term. His administration has had to deal with two 100-year floods and two of the harshest winters on record.

He was the architect of plans to repair Alpine Dam and the program to buy out 112 families who lived in the flooded area and help them relocate. He brought in Tim Hansen to overhaul the

poorly managed Public Works Department. That department has been rightfully praised for its snow-removal efforts in the face of back to back record winters.

Morrissey delivered on safe water and storm water management. Through him, the city embarked on an ambitious \$75 million rehab of the city's water system. The city also invested more than \$2 million to improve storm water management.

These are the basic services every city needs and Morrissey is proving that he can deliver. And, as he delivers the basics, Morrissey stays focused on his vision for a greater Rockford, a vision that includes a vibrant downtown, an educated populace and safe neighborhoods. He gets it. He's learning it. And, he is proving he can get the job done in the face of daunting odds.

Although the challenges are great, we think Morrissey has grown as a leader and has laid the groundwork that should make the city better over the next four years.

Morrissey's scorecard

Accountability

Our eyes tend to glaze over when the mayor talks numbers, but we think gathering data, using RockStat to measure where the city is and where it needs to go is important.

RockStat is a data-driven approach to making decisions and deploying

resources. RockStat meetings were opened to the public this year and analysis is posted on the city's Web site.

We agree with the mayor when he says you can't figure out where you're going unless you know where you are. That's why his RockStat efforts have been needed.



Crime

Winnebago County, with Rockford feeding it, had the highest crime rate in Illinois for six straight years. In 2007, it fell to No. 2 behind Sangamon County.

Winnebago County saw a 12.8 percent drop and the city of Rockford saw its rate drop 14.4 percent. The state rate dropped 3.6 percent.

Rockford created a new Weed and Seed area along the Kishwaukee Street corridor to try to improve housing stock and fight crime with specific crime-fighting strategies and code enforcement. The Police

Department has designated other target areas to make life as unpleasant for bad guys as possible.

For years Rockford has been considered an easy mark. That's changing. The tougher it is for crooks to do business here, the less likely that they will come here. It's a strategy that takes time and perseverance.

Under Morrissey's direction, the department has implemented community policing, which appears to be working. More needs to be done, but progress has been made.



Roads

Rockford voters said they were dissatisfied with the status quo when they elected Morrissey and again when they voted to approve a 1-percentage point increase in the city's sales tax.

We still think the sales tax is a better way of generating revenue than resorting to bonds that are paid off through property taxes.

Using bonds to build and fix roads was a waste of money. Because of interest paid on bonds, it cost about \$1.3 million to do \$1 million

in work. With the sales tax, \$1 million equals \$1 million. More work can be done with less money.

People who think the roads should be in better shape should realize that 2008 was the first year full year for the tax. The roads did not disintegrate overnight and won't be repaired overnight, either.

Still, 149 blocks of residential streets have been resurfaced; 24 alleys have been repaired or reconstructed 24 city alleys; and five streets were completely reconstructed. That's just a partial list of the work that's been done.



Education

The mayor's involvement in education is a good thing. As recently as 2005, Rockford's chronic truancy rate was 9.6 percent. Today it's 5.8 percent, though that remains much higher than Illinois' 2.5 percent average. Although credit must be shared, Morrissey's leadership and consistent bully pulpit messages helped drive the numbers down.

His television

commercials with former Superintendent Dennis Thompson brought attention to the problem. His hiring of Adam Smith as director of education and lifelong learning, showed Morrissey's commitment to solving the problem.

Rockford must improve the number of college graduates who live and work in the city. Morrissey's "city university" is an intriguing concept we'd like to see move forward.



Jobs

Unemployment is unacceptably high, but it would be even worse if it weren't for the city's efforts to bring the Lowe's distribution center and its 700 jobs here.

Recruiting the WanXiang Solar Panel Plant and its 60 jobs could pave the way for an alternative energy business boom in the Rock River Valley.

We'd like to see the

mayor bring back an idea we haven't heard about for a couple of years — developing a fiber optic ring. That service would be much more advanced than the broadband service that residents have in their homes. It would offer the kind of real-time information that business, industry, medicine and research require for day-to-day needs and it would be another tool to recruit businesses and jobs.

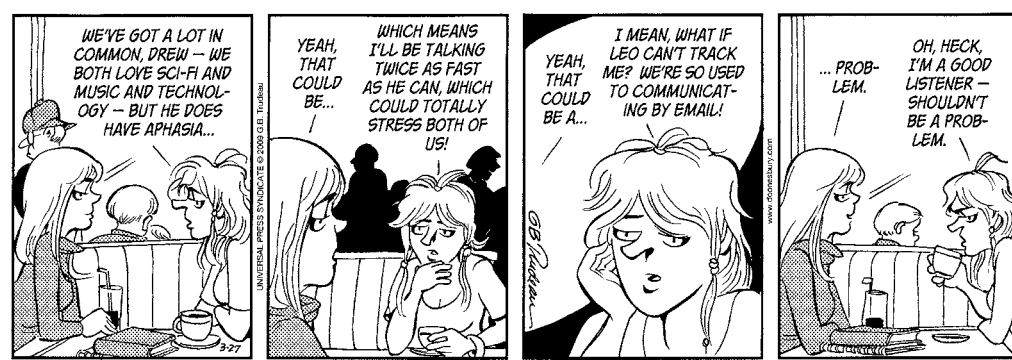
COMPARE CANDIDATES ONLINE

We asked more than 700 candidates in Winnebago, Boone and Ogle counties to give us information about themselves and respond to questions about issues in their campaigns. Use our online voter guide to build a personal ballot or browse all local races. Go to rrstar.com and look for the link under Special Reports.

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