

## Then and now

Contributed by William Trent  
 Wednesday, 05 December 2007  
 Last Updated Wednesday, 05 December 2007

Well, Missing Mayor Doug Palmer has been very much in evidence around town of late.

Mostly, he's been busy trying to prop up his leaky ship of state as it founders on the rocks of the residency requirements the Mayor has arbitrarily waived for Police Director Joe Santiago.

Amidst claims of "family emergencies," "unaffordable homes," "who would come here if he leaves," and "Trenton will be a laughing stock" the Mayor has been busy throwing hissy fits in the press and in front of City Council because he isn't getting his way. Seems he just can't imagine why "one of the nation's top Police Directors" should have to live in the town where he works rather than some 50 miles away. And Mr. Palmer is absolutely apoplectic over the fact that anyone would challenge his position on this.

Well, interestingly enough Mayor Palmer didn't always feel this way. Back in 1999 when he was trying equally as hard to convince Trenton's residents that a change was needed from a Police Chief to a Police Director, Palmer was adamant that it was imperative for the leader of the Police Department to be a bona fide city resident who was fully engaged with the community.

In an op-ed piece published in the Times of Trenton in March of that year, Douglas Palmer expounded on the where's, why's and how's of his plan. Maybe he should go back and read this before he continues his ridiculous rants on this topic.

The Times of Trenton Archive  
 COPYRIGHT © The Times of Trenton 1999

Date: 1999/03/15 Monday Page: Section: Editorial Edition: Size: 1333 words

Changes will bring accountability

By Douglas H. Palmer

One of the biggest issues of concern that our community and my administration are facing is how to effectively deal with neighborhood crime and public safety in Trenton. While we have made significant progress reducing the number of major crimes that occur in our city, like murder and armed robbery, we have not been able to adequately deal with the biggest problem in our communities \_ nuisance crimes, such as drug dealing, prostitution and illegal street gambling. These are the crimes that literally destroy the fabric of our communities and our residents' quality of life.

As a result, our communities have increasingly, and rightly, demanded greater police presence and responsiveness. They have made these demands for relief, most particularly, to me. When they have made them even to city council, the council has then turned to me and my administration for relief.

The problem

Under the current system, with the police department headed by a police chief, my ability as mayor to hold the head of the police force completely and immediately accountable for providing this relief is greatly limited. There are stipulations concerning when, if, how, and for what reason a police chief can be disciplined or terminated.

Perhaps the greatest limitation, however, is job tenure. As it exists, the police chief serves from date of appointment until mandatory retirement at age 65. Even residency is a complicating factor. The mayor cannot even require that the police chief live in our city. I personally believe, and have heard from enough residents to know that they too believe, when it comes to the safety of our city, nothing is more important, symbolically, than for the head of the police force to live in the city that he or she is in control of protecting and serving. I cannot be persuaded that it is OK for our police chief to be isolated from our communities.

Not `who' but `what'

Many people are asking, and many more are speculating, ``Who does the mayor want?" I have not made a decision on ``who" I want for the job; but, I do know what I want. I want the authority to appoint the best person for the job, the authority to hold that person immediately accountable, and the authority to take action at the point when these factors are

no longer the case. Simply put, I want someone who is just as accountable to me as I am to the people who elected me.

I want someone who will work with this administration, city council and our community as a team, with one goal in mind \_ better policing, for a safer community. I want someone who will live with us and work with us, without the shield of tenure for job protection \_ a luxury that neither I nor city council have. We cannot sit in our positions and know that, barring the most extreme circumstances, our jobs are guaranteed until age 65, as a police chief can. There simply is too much at stake in our communities to provide that much of a disincentive for a police chief to make the difficult decisions or major changes that are required in such a tough job.

As we continue working toward our goal of neighborhood revitalization, we must be assured that the person responsible for police operations feels a strong sense of obligation to work as a member of the team to help reach a common goal. We have an opportunity not to subject ourselves to the whims of a police chief who may or may not have the same goals in mind.

Take, for example, the current crisis the governor and state police are facing. If Gov. Whitman's state police superintendent had had the protection of tenure, the governor would not have been able to immediately hold the head of the police force accountable for his actions, which were, as she put it, "inconsistent" with what she is trying to accomplish. Her ability to respond swiftly was key in extinguishing this issue before statewide discord occurred. Without a doubt, the public would hold the governor accountable for taking action, whether she could have or not.

As mayor, I am held responsible and accountable to our residents for the actions or inactions of the city's police force. And, like our governor, I want the authority to hold that individual just as accountable as I am to the people who elected me \_ someone who has as much to lose as I do if they don't perform. As the current chief will soon retire, we now have a short window of opportunity, one we will not have again for a long time, to explore the best way to make that happen.

#### A new system

Because of the critical importance of this issue and because of this timely opportunity, in the coming days I will formally propose to city council that we abolish three positions \_ those of both police and fire chief, as well as public safety director. I will request that we form two separate departments in police and fire with individual department directors who report directly to the mayor. The deputy chiefs in both departments would report to their respective department directors.

This issue is so important to me that I believe we must take this opportunity to elevate these critical entities to the cabinet level and bring them to the table to be a closer and more involved part of city management.

No other services that the city provides to our residents are more important than police and fire protection and safety. I believe with separate directors who can concentrate specifically on the two separate departments, we would improve both fiscal and staff accountability. Now is our window of opportunity to make changes that, in time, can have dramatic impact on our community and in our neighborhoods. Now is our opportunity, as we are redeveloping our city at rapid pace, to ensure that we have police and fire departments that are a part of making Trenton the great place, the fantastic city, that it is becoming. We already know it is difficult to do this without them at the table as part of our team.

#### Timetable

After the current police chief's April 1 retirement, Public Safety Director Dennis Keenan will be in charge of daily police operations until a decision has been made by city council and I have appointed a person to fill the position.

#### Accountability

During my last State of the City Address, I said I would raise the bar of accountability to get to the next level of difficult but necessary changes and improvements that our city and its residents must have. Unlike what some people have suggested, this is not a political issue. It is not a racial issue. It is not even an issue about individuals. This issue is about choosing a method of leadership that is best for police operations and accountable to the community.

I already know that changing the status quo will not be a welcome idea for everyone. On an individual basis, I can appreciate that. But I must make the choices that are best for communities, not individuals. However, I can't do it alone. Now it is up to city council to decide. Will we move forward, as many other progressive cities have, and take this opportunity to have more accountability from the leadership of our police department? Or, will we simply accept the status quo?

Once this proposal has been presented, it will be up to the council to decide whether we continue business as usual, or whether we take this rare opportunity to make the best selection of individuals to ensure that the safety and well-being of our residents, the trust between our community and police force, and the quality of life in our neighborhoods are the number one priorities in public safety. They are to me, and they should be to city council because our residents deserve no less.

Reforming government when necessary to meet the needs of the people is not just a good thing to do, it is what we are obligated to do. It is my sincerest hope that our city council will look at the strong merits of our proposal and judge it, as I have, with all of the people they serve in mind.

Douglas H. Palmer is mayor of Trenton.