Lago Vista Mayor Shane R. Saum
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Building a Stronger, More Accountable City Government

Today, the City announced a new organizational structure approved by the City Council. I want to share why I believe this is an important step toward the change and improvements many of our residents have been asking to see.

First, this is about building a stronger leadership team.

Historically, our City Manager has had approximately 10+ department directors reporting directly to that one position. That means one person has been responsible for managing the daily needs, challenges, and decisions of nearly every department in the City.

Our new structure establishes three Executive Director positions overseeing Administrative Services, Community & Development Services, and Public & Municipal Services. Larger cities, including Cedar Park and Leander, often have similar positions under the title of Assistant City Managers. I won't spend much time on the Chief of Police position, because they are already at that level under the current structure and the reorg doesn't change their leadership structure. But the Chief of Police is an important leadership position in the City.

This allows our City Manager to spend less time managing individual departmental issues and more time focusing on strategic priorities, long-term planning, and implementing the direction of the City Council.

But equally important, these Executive Directors need to be leaders and mentors, not simply another layer of management.

Our directors, supervisors, and employees deserve leadership that has the time to support them, help solve problems, invest in their professional development, and prepare them for future opportunities within our City.

Second, we need to address a longstanding challenge: City Manager turnover.

There has been considerable discussion about why Lago Vista has experienced so many City Manager transitions. While some focus on recent years, this challenge has existed across multiple administrations, Mayors, and City Councils.

I believe the reasons are complex and different for each individual. But one reality is that smaller cities often compete with larger communities for experienced municipal leadership. Some City Managers will spend their careers in one community. Others will eventually pursue opportunities elsewhere. I compare it to baseball. There is A, AA, AAA and the Majors. Some city managers are working to get to the Majors and see Lago Vista like an A or AA ballclub. A great place to develop, but they want to move up. There is nothing wrong with that. The City just needs to plan for it.

Rather than expecting every City Manager to remain indefinitely, I believe we should build an organization that is prepared for leadership transitions.

A City Manager leaving should not mean the City has to start over.

I want our future City Managers to invest in developing the leaders beneath them. Ideally, we will eventually have Executive Directors who are qualified to be the next City Manager themselves. At a minimum, we should be developing leaders capable of providing stability and continuity during transitions. Back to my baseball analogy, Lago Vista needs to develop a farm system where we grow our own talent.

We should be growing our own talent, retaining institutional knowledge, and creating career opportunities for employees who want to build their futures in Lago Vista.

Third, we are going to establish clearer priorities and expectations for City government.

In November, the City Council will hold two strategic planning meetings with an experienced municipal facilitator who regularly works with cities on this very process.

My goal is for Council to come out of these meetings with a clearly defined, manageable set of priorities that will guide our decisions, our budget, and the work of City staff.

I expect water and wastewater infrastructure, including how we responsibly finance those investments, to be a major priority. Improving our financial reporting, transparency, and budgeting processes should also be near the top of that discussion.

But the purpose of strategic planning is not to create another long list of things we would like to accomplish.

It is to narrow our focus, simplify our priorities, and commit to getting the most important things done.

Every new initiative, spending proposal, and major policy decision should be evaluated through those priorities. If something doesn't advance our most important objectives, we need to be willing to ask whether it deserves our time and taxpayer dollars right now.

And this is where our new organizational structure becomes especially important.

Our City Manager and Executive Directors should have clear direction from Council about what success looks like. In turn, they can provide that same direction, support, and accountability to the employees and departments they lead.

Finally, this must translate into better service for our residents.

An organizational chart alone will not fix everything. Neither will a strategic planning document that sits on a shelf.

Success will depend on hiring the right people, establishing measurable expectations, holding ourselves accountable, and following through on the priorities we establish.

I believe these changes together represent an important step toward a more focused, professional, efficient, and resilient City government.

Our residents deserve a City that operates effectively regardless of who occupies the City Manager's office, the Mayor or Council Members. Our employees deserve leadership that invests in their success. And our taxpayers deserve a City government that knows its priorities and makes decisions accordingly.

That is the kind of lasting change I want to help bring to Lago Vista.

You can review the new organizational chart below and read the City's official announcement.