

Teague: Ready to return to public service

He would have run if special election held for council vacancy

Thursday, January 24, 2008

By MICKEY POWELL - Bulletin Staff Writer  
Martinsville Bulletin

When former mayor Gene Teague decided not to seek re-election to the Martinsville City Council in 2004, his life was undergoing changes.

He had just started a new job, one that he foresaw was going to require a lot of travel, especially in his first year with the company.

His daughter, Sara, was getting ready to go to college, and he and his wife, Sandi, were “getting ready to experience the empty nest syndrome” and did not know what to expect, he recalled.

And, after serving on the council for a decade, he was ready for a break from public service, he admitted.

But his life has settled down since then.

Teague, 45, is director of business planning for VF Sportswear. He is not traveling as much for his job anymore, and he and his wife have settled into life at home without a daughter to raise.

He never lost his desire for public service, though, and he wants to be involved in local government again.

The council on Tuesday unanimously appointed Teague to fill the remaining 29 months of a council seat previously held by Mark Anderson, who recently resigned because he is moving to Danville.

Being involved in community and public service is “some of the best work you can find,” said Teague, because “you can see the results of what you’re doing.”

Council members in 1994 appointed Teague to fill a vacancy left by former councilman Steve Draper, who left council when he was elected city sheriff, a post he still holds. Voters then elected Teague in 1996 and 2000. He served 10 years on the council and was chosen as vice mayor in 1998 and mayor in 2002.

Although he voted to appoint Teague, current Mayor Kimble Reynolds Jr. said during Tuesday’s meeting that he would have preferred to call a special election to fill Anderson’s former seat so voters could be involved.

“I agree that citizens should have the ultimate say” in who represents them in local government, Teague said.

He said, however, that if a special election to fill the vacancy was held alongside the May 6 municipal election in which three other council seats are up for grabs, it would be possible to have four out of five council members with no previous government experience.

Teague indicated he probably would have run for a four-year council seat in May if the council had not appointed him to replace Anderson.

He said he thinks his previous council experience will enable him to help the current council make decisions that are best for Martinsville.

“I think every person (on council) strives to do what they think is right for the city,” Teague said. “There are quality people on the council now, and there were quality people on it in the past.”

He has not yet gotten a sense of how well current council members work together, but he said, “I don’t know how you could serve on the council and make tough decisions and not work together” well.

Tuesday night, the council faced a tough decision — whether to invest in the construction of power plants and buy electricity from those plants as a way to try and gain control over rising wholesale power costs.

Spurred by public opposition to a \$3.5 million annual commitment for 40 years, the council chose not to take part in the power plants. Teague had not yet been sworn into office when that decision was made, but he spoke from the floor and encouraged council members to participate in the projects.

Had he been sworn in already, he said he would have made a motion to take part in the projects, even though he knows it would have been defeated.

“I think it was our cheapest solution” for buying wholesale power in the future, he said, even though a consulting firm’s figures show a deal with Appalachian Power (APCo) would be slightly cheaper.

He was one of only a few people at the meeting who voiced support for participating in the power plants.

“You have to stand up for your convictions,” Teague said, even if they are different from other people’s ways of thinking. He added that he thinks city residents want their elected officials to do what is best for Martinsville and not necessarily what is the popular option.

He said he thinks the city could have communicated with the public better about potential benefits of the AMP-Ohio projects.

“Part of the issue was there was no champion for the AMP-Ohio projects” who stepped forward with complete information that clearly pointed out potential benefits, Teague said.

“If you don’t tell your story, someone else will,” he said. “They’ll fill in the gaps ... in places where there’s an absence of data with things that may or may not be correct.”

He declined to discuss other controversial issues that have arisen since he left the council in 2004.

Teague said the major issues affecting the city have not changed in recent years.

Recruiting new business and industry is “very important,” said Teague, who said he is pleased with the Martinsville-Henry County Economic Development Corp.’s efforts. “We need to do everything we can to grow the tax base ... with a sense of urgency.”

Crucial projects to economic development include developing new industrial parks and getting Interstate 73 built, he said.

Efforts to improve the city schools and revitalize neighborhoods also must continue, he said, noting those also can help improve economic development.

Teague said he plans to run for his new council seat when it comes up for election in 2010, but it is too soon to say for sure.

“It’s tough for anyone to say what they’re going to do two years from now,” he said.

He did not rule out the possibility of serving as the city’s appointed mayor again if council members want him in that role. But “I have no burning desire to be mayor,” he said.

The main duties of Martinsville’s mayor are presiding over council meetings and being a spokesman for the city, Teague said. Being mayor may carry a little more prestige, but the mayor has only one vote like all other council members, he said, so he or she has no more influence than the others.