

City manager starting over, career-wise

Johnson quitting to be a counselor

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SOLANA BEACH – City Manager Barry Johnson is moving from the top rungs of his profession to the bottom of the ladder in a brand new occupation after today.

Johnson is packed and ready to leave his four-year post to become a counselor-in-training next month at South Bay Community Center in Chula Vista.

Deputy City Manager David Ott will serve as interim city manager until Aug. 1, when he will assume the permanent title.

Johnson is not just changing careers. He is taking a financial dive.

He will not be paid for six months while he trains as a substance abuse recovery therapist helping teenagers.

After that, the 41-year-old can expect to be paid \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year until he obtains a marriage and family therapist's license, which will take 3,000 hours of work.

That's a night-and-day difference from his \$149,344-a-year salary and \$400-a-month car allowance.

“Not a lot of people would jump out of their lives that far back to the beginning,” one of his assistants, Nancy Kerry, said yesterday.

But Johnson leaves at the top of his game, with unanimous kudos.

“He did an excellent job being neutral as a city manager,” said Todd Cardiff, a member of the environmental advocacy organization Surfrider Foundation. “I always felt when I talked to Barry, he was listening.”

Ron Lucker, a member of the Beach and Bluff Conservancy, which takes an opposite position from the Surfrider Foundation on the controversial issue of whether sea walls should be built, praised Johnson for understanding the city's coastal needs.



CRISSY PASQUAL / Union-Tribune
Solana Beach City Manager Barry Johnson packed boxes in his office yesterday as Deputy City Manager Lesa Heebner said farewell.

“He is very good,” Lucker said.

Sean MacLeod, a member of the executive committee of South Cedros Property Owners Association, said he has nothing but praise for Johnson.

“He was accessible, and he had a vision for the city,” MacLeod said.

Deputy City Manager Lesa Heebner said she was pleased for Johnson but sad to see him go.

“He is a great man. He will do well,” she said.

Johnson said his decision to make a career switch was motivated by a simple desire for change. Yesterday at his office, where paint was drying for his successor, Johnson talked with excitement about his new career.

“I wanted to be a city manager at a young age, and I liked it,” said Johnson, pared down from his usual shirt and tie to a Quicksilver checkered shirt, jeans and running shoes. “It is not a calling to me as much anymore. I like the one-on-one stuff.”

Johnson began taking psychology courses last year at National University and is scheduled to complete his master's degree next month.

“As a kid, I grew up in a rougher area – Lemon Grove. I knew kids that got in trouble,” he said. “I could have easily gone down that path.”

He said he's prepared to earn less because he has always lived simply and knows how to make ends meet.

Having been in civil service for 20 years, 11 of which were spent as city manager in Loma Linda, Hollister, Imperial Beach and Solana Beach, he is vested in the public service retirement system.

Johnson will move back to his Imperial Beach home, which he has owned since he was a city manager there. He will sell his Cardiff condominium and is asking \$485,000.

His son, Ross, attends San Dieguito Academy in Encinitas and will transfer to Mar Vista High School in Imperial Beach in the fall. Ross had gone to school in Imperial Beach, and he will renew friendships, Johnson said.

The soon-to-be former city manager is credited for completing capital projects that languished before he arrived in July 2002. They included:

- The 1.7-mile, \$4.5 million Coastal Rail Trail along the railroad tracks and Highway 101.
- The \$1.4 million Rosa Street Bridge that opened last year over the railroad tracks.
- The Solana Beach redevelopment agency, which last week issued \$3.45 million in bonds to finance capital improvement projects.
- And taking the lead in the state to ban smoking at city beaches in 2003.

Johnson's work also included the planning of:

- The \$2.5 million Cliff Street Bridge for pedestrians over the rail tracks.
- The \$4 million future improvements at Fletcher Cove, which include building a park on the parking lot.
- And a coastal plan to regulate development, which is pending California Coastal Commission approval. Solana Beach was the only city in the county without such a plan.

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