

Opinion

Political endorsement for Mayor: Stick with Johnson

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The Saratogian endorses Scott Johnson for a third term as Saratoga Springs mayor.

Both Johnson and challenger Brent Wilkes would serve Saratoga Springs well at the helm of the City Council. Though their styles differ, they are both people of vision and reason, with demonstrated experience as effective managers and leaders.

Johnson has made measurable improvements to the city and City Hall during his first two terms. He spearheaded the consolidation of health coverage for city employees against the initial objections of all the unions, a move that will save taxpayers money without causing a hardship for city employees. And new employees are paying 20 percent of their health care coverage, approaching the share contributed by private-sector employees.

Also under Johnson's leadership, the city now has an indoor recreation center, something that had been talked about for years by prior City Councils. He is a pragmatic mayor whose years as a successful litigator are reflected in his firm but thoughtful decision-making.

One of those decisions — going to court to prevent the public from voting to change the city's form of government — is at the heart of Wilkes' campaign.

Wilkes was a key member of a grassroots group that worked for many months, with meetings open to interested citizens, to develop a proposal to change Saratoga Springs' form of government. The current commission form of government gives equal authority to all five members of the City Council — the mayor and four commissioners — and all have both administrative and legislative roles. The proposed change would create a strictly legislative council, with an appointed city manager running City Hall.

Wilkes chastises Johnson for blocking the public from voting on this proposal. But Johnson is adamant that the proposal has serious flaws and that his obligation is to protect the city. So the mayor voted, along with two of his council colleagues, first to challenge the proposal in court and then to appeal a decision that ruled in favor of the charter change group. That appeal is pending.

There are undeniable merits to a system that actually puts someone in charge of city operations. But there are concerns with the proposal which, on the last of its 57 pages, includes Wilkes by name as a member of a team that would oversee the transition and make decisions about key city job duties and spending.

Johnson and Wilkes' positions on this charter change issue are not driven by a thirst for power. Each believe they are acting in the best interest of Saratoga Springs. Johnson is not against making changes to the charter — he is just convinced that this group's proposal, especially related to the potential costs, is too flawed.

Wilkes says there should be more strategic planning, but Johnson can point to a six-year capital plan, although the economic downturn put the kibosh on some projects.

Wilkes says his personal style would make him a more approachable mayor, and he would run a more open administration. On the latter point, the Johnson administration has indeed been too quick to reject requests to provide the public with information in accordance with the state's Freedom of Information laws. But that's not reason enough to toss Johnson out of office.

The City Council during Johnson's tenure has been refreshingly civil, and the city has weathered a recession, coped with layoffs in Public Safety and Public Works, and still managed to add a recreational facility. Stick with Johnson.