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## Council opts for applications, interviews to fill vacant seat

By Pippa Fisher



All four members of the city council, from left: Council Member Susan Candell, Vice Mayor Mike Anderson, Mayor Cam Burks, and Council Member Teresa Gerringer listen to public comment at the Dec. 19 meeting. Photo Pippa Fisher

A special meeting, held Dec. 19 to decide how best to fill the vacant fifth seat on the city council, resulted in a unanimous decision to accept applications and hold interviews in early January.

The seat became vacant on the eve of the Nov. 6 election with the untimely passing of Council Member Mark Mitchell. The timing has prompted many in the community to call for simply appointing the third placed candidate, former city council member Ivor Samson. But many others are calling for the city to honor the way in which councils have traditionally acted in such situations, by taking applications and going through an interview process.

Because there are fewer than two years of the term remaining, the council must appoint a new member rather than hold a special election. But that's where the legal guidelines end. With a community divided following a bitterly campaigned election fuelled by negative and sometimes false comments on social media, the new city council that includes two brand new members faced a tough decision.

Should the timing be taken into account, given that voters had just spoken and that Samson had garnered 4,641 votes, only 590 votes behind the second place candidate? Would he have been elected had voters been asked to elect for three spots? Is it more transparent to hold open interviews with further public input even if the end result is the same? Should the city use the method of interviews that has worked in the past? These considerations were on the minds of the council members as they took public comment.

The council, which had previously heard comments from 30 members of the public at the regular Dec. 10 meeting, once again took comments from close to as many people in addition to the many emails, letters and online comments they had received on the subject. Residents expressed their opinions and argued analysis of the votes to demonstrate how Samson should or should not be appointed there and then.

Mayor Cam Burks acknowledged the volume of public input, and noted that both options had significant merit and compelling arguments. In the end, however, all supported the previously used open application/interview process and recognized the need to codify the process to develop policy for the future.

"I would like to thank the members of the public who took the time to attend meetings and provide insightful and sincere public comment on this very important matter," said Burks, noting, "The discourse, on all sides of the debate, was civil and respectful and, again, demonstrates the passion in our community to come together, get involved, speak up, and advocate for what folks truly believe is in the best interest of Lafayette."

The council is accepting applications until 5 p.m. Friday, Jan. 4. Registered voters residing within Lafayette city limits can apply to fill the term, which ends December 2020.

The council will review applications and hold interviews during the week of Jan. 7 and hopes to make the appointment by Jan. 11, ideally installing the new member on the first council meeting of the year on Jan. 14.

For more information, go to the city website at <https://www.lovelafayette.org>.

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