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And then again there were five - Steven Bliss appointed to city council

By Pippa Fisher



City Clerk Joanne Robbins swears in the latest member of the council, Steven Bliss. Photo Pippa Fisher

Gerringer favoring Bliss, with Mayor Cam Burks and Candell for Samson.

Choosing to continue the meeting and avoid resolving the deadlock with a coin toss, which actually happened 15 years ago in another deadlock situation, the council met again three days later, bringing back both Bliss and Samson for further questions.

The evening was emotionally charged. Close to 30 speakers voiced opinions. Several residents showed dismay that the issue could potentially be decided by a coin toss and urged the council to "do their job." Posters supporting Samson lined the steps outside the meeting room.

The council asked questions of each candidate to draw comments on hot topics such as state mandates on housing and development, and restoring transparency and trust in local government.

Samson pointed to his experience on council - he has served as mayor in addition to serving on the planning commission and has been Lafayette Citizen of the Year. He was appointed to the council most recently in 2016 following former council member Brandt Andersson's resignation at a time when the city was faced with multiple lawsuits. For many, his work on the revised conflict of interest policy was pivotal with many favoring his determined approach to transparency. The new COI policy prompted five planning commissioners to resign at the time. For Samson's supporters who saw this as a breath of fresh air, this was a critical issue. Others felt the strict policy to be overreaching.

"A diversity of views on the council is important," said Samson "And I bring that," he said, adding that he is an independent voice who can bring the community together.

Bliss, an almost eight-year Lafayette resident, stressed his professional experience with the California Budget and Policy Center in Sacramento and his work on the Housing Commission for the city of Menlo Park and as a member of the Allentown Redevelopment Authority in Pennsylvania.

Bliss told the council it is critical for the city to align its vision for Lafayette within the law of the state's legal requirements, referring to Senate Bill 2923 which will allow BART to build on its parking lots and he pointed to his commitment to open space preservation and to serious public discourse.

As the council discussed the candidates it became apparent that Gerringer, Candell and Anderson were standing by their original opinions. Anderson said that two years ago they needed Samson's legal mind.

"Now we face new issues," he said, stressing that his decision was not personal.

It was Burks who broke the deadlock, backing Bliss stating the need for someone who can help with the "No. 1 threat coming out of Sacramento." With Candell voting against, it was 3:1 to appoint Bliss. As the vote was taken, several Samson supporters left the room, visibly angry.

Following the meeting Burks explained, "I decided that I would be that council member, as the mayor, to come to the middle, and, for the substantive reasons I stated involving Council Member Bliss's skills vis-à-vis what I consider the most serious threat to the core values of our city, I shifted from my initial position and broke the deadlock."

Burks says he is thrilled to welcome Bliss to the council. "Council Member Bliss's expertise will be critical as we continue to fully realize the impacts of the Bay Area housing crisis and work hard to do our part to enable development in a smart way, using our public processes and commissions, that will sustain the character of our city."

Burks says that moving the city forward was absolutely essential. "It is my hope that the entire community will now move forward in a civil and respectful way. I'm grateful for the many members of the community who attended both meetings and provided valuable input regarding our appointment process and candidates. I'm also sincerely thankful to all of our applicants for their willingness to step up and commit themselves 100 percent to our city."

Bliss, a Midwesterner by birth, has lived in the Bay Area since 1990. He lives with his wife Malaika Stolle. Their three children, Leila, Theo and Ruthie attend Lafayette public schools.

"I'm really grateful to have this opportunity to serve as a member of the community on this council," he says, adding, "But it's with sadness to have this opportunity in this way. As a city we're still in mourning for someone who offered so much. We would do well to bear in mind the love for Lafayette and civic engagement that Mark Mitchell represented."

Bliss hopes to support the mayor's call for public participation moving forward. He lists as his priorities strengthening the downtown, encouraging businesses as a partnership and making a downtown that's pedestrian and bike friendly.

He wants to ensure that development happens in a forward-thinking and vibrant way, using infill development to allow growth to be managed and to allow for preservation of open space. He's looking forward to the hiring of a city manager in the next few months and maintaining the city's healthy reserve.

"I'm looking forward to serving," says Bliss.

Reach the reporter at: pippa@lamorindaweekly.com

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