

New Highlands Council director sought but council motives are questioned

Posted: Monday, July 21, 2014 2:03 pm | Updated: 2:05 pm, Mon Jul 21, 2014.

By PHIL GARBER, MANAGING EDITOR

Nearly four months after the N.J. Highlands Council's executive director resigned, the council is advertising for a replacement.

One council member said the delay in beginning a search for a permanent director was caused by a backlog of work. But a frequent critic said she doesn't think the council is acting in good faith and plans to rehire its acting director regardless of the search.

Gene Feyl of Denville served for 22 months as director but stepped down from the \$116,000 post in late March. He was replaced temporarily by Deputy Director Margaret Nordstrom of Washington Township. Nordstrom is paid \$92,000, the same amount she earned as deputy director.

Feyl and Nordstrom are both former Republican freeholders and were the only candidates when they were picked to be director and deputy director in 2012.

They were brought on board after the council fired its former director, Eileen Swan. Swan had the support of environmentalists and her dismissal was seen as an effort by Gov. Chris Christie to undermine the council.

After Swan's termination, Tom Borden, the former deputy executive director, also quit his post.

Bureaucratic Delays

Council Chairman James Rilee of Roxbury said the ad was delayed while the personnel committee collected more information. Rilee said Nordstrom plans to apply for the post.

"Margaret has done a great job," Rilee said. "She'll submit a resume as will anyone else who is interested."

Nordstrom was not available for comment.

Kurt Alstede, a member of the council's search team, said there was no hurry to look for a permanent director. He said Nordstrom has done a "suitable job" and that the council wanted to avoid the controversy when Feyl and Nordstrom were hired.

“We’ve been able to take our time and not rush into anything, unlike previously,” said Alstede of Chester and owner of Alstede Farm.

“We’re advertising and we need to see what talent is out there,” Alstede said. “I don’t believe it’s a slam dunk for anybody. There isn’t a recipe specific for the person we’ll select.”

The council hasn’t advertised for the post until now because members were busy with the reviews of the regional master plan. Most recently, council members have been involved in hearing concerns about the contaminated Fenimore Landfill in Roxbury, Alstede said.

Julia Somers, director of the N.J. Highlands Coalition said the advertising is a sham.

“I don’t believe it is being done in good faith,” said Somers of Harding Township. “I don’t believe the council has any intention to take resumes.”

The Highlands Coalition represents various grass roots groups formed to protect the Highlands from further development.

Somers said her comments weren’t meant to infer that Nordstrom hasn’t done an acceptable job.

“But is she the strongest candidate? I really doubt it,” Somers said. “Margaret has been working very hard but her biggest hurdle is the governor’s office.”

Somers also said she suspects the council is advertising now because it is a time when many people are away on vacation and not likely to voice their concerns.

“It’s being done in August because nobody is paying attention,” Somers said.

The position was posted on Friday, July 18, on the council website and on the state’s Civil Service website.

Applications will be accepted through Wednesday, Aug. 6.

The ad says a new director will implement the policies and decisions of the Highlands Council and administer the operations, office and administrative staff.”

The director will be responsible for communications, operations and constituent relations along with coordination with state agencies, the state Legislature and other interested entities.

Candidates must have a bachelor’s degree and several years of relevant professional experience.

Applicants should submit a cover letter indicating interest and experience, a resume, salary history, example of professional work product and names and phone numbers of three references. The information can be mailed to Ranji Persaud, New Jersey Highlands Council, 100 North Road, Chester, N.J.; faxed to (908) 879-4205; by email to ranji.persaud@highlands.state.nj.us.