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Legacy Mayor Stoney, CAO Saunders Some Failure, Some Success

Great Hope With Mayor Avula

It is distressing to watch the farewell tour of Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney and CAO Lincoln Saunders. Reading their press releases and reviewing Richmond's website, it might feel like you are from another planet, and you might think that Richmond government has been extremely well managed, when it has not.

There is great hope for Richmond government because many of Stoney's and Saunderson's failings listed below can possibly be addressed by incoming Mayor Avula and his transition team:

1200 New City Workers, Extreme Low Performance, Low Respect For Leadership

Stoney and Saunders hired about 1200 new city workers and the average taxpayer can't name one new service they received. The morale of Richmond city employees has been measured as among the lowest in the US. The culture at city hall is one of criticism, punishment and secrecy. Low morale especially occurs when there is low respect for leadership due to a lack of experience or training. Stoney and Saunders had little or no prior experience, and things did not go well much of the time.

City 311, A Voice-Mail Inferno

Citizens often can not reach the city staff by phone. The city's 311 phone system is a call into Voice-Mail inferno because, leave a message and you will likely never get a return call. You can literally hold for an hour, and you will be cut off. This is failure of government's most basic function.

Disappearing Phone Directory

Making matters worse Stoney and CAO Saunders, eliminated the city employee phone directory. That's right, they seemingly wanted to make it impossible for a citizen to ever get help by phone or email. There is a consistent theme: If few citizens get through, the city has fewer problems to solve. This is a complete failure to serve all citizens including our most needy citizens, especially Black and Brown.

Breaking State FOIA Law

FOIA is a state law which says that all city documents are public and belong to the citizens. Many times when documents were requested by the press, CAO Saunders refused. He demonstrated an obsession with secrecy. The city faces multiple FOIA lawsuits which they will likely lose.

\$100,000 Raise

Unbelievably, CAO Lincoln Saunders had the nerve to recently give himself a whopping raise of about \$100,000 on top of his already excessive salary, bringing it to \$334,700. He just took our taxpayer money for himself.

19 City Employee Holidays. Don't Come to Work! Often No One at City Hall

Shockingly, CAO Saunders and Stoney increased the number of city employee paid days off to 19 including 2 for mental health. Often making city hall like a ghost town, dark, and unavailable to assist citizens or do any work on an excessive number of days. That's nearly a month per year city hall is empty, but the phones still ring. Serving citizens is no priority in RVA. (State of Virginia offers 13 employee holidays)

Department of Public Utilities in Chaos

The city DPU is riddled with incompetence. Tens of \$ millions in past due accounts are documented as past due or uncollectible. They seem unable to read meters causing wild water and gas bills, some of which are \$2,000, \$5,000, and even \$10,000, for a single residence. The average telephone hold time for DPU customer service is over one hour. Water meters are literally leaking all over the city.

Blundered Real Estate Deals

Stoney and Saunders had little to no experience with real estate development, yet they undertook the fatally ill-conceived \$1.5 billion Navy Hill project downtown. It called for a 500 room hotel, massive amounts of new retail and office space for which there was no demand, and 26 restaurants which no one asked for. These novices were destined to fail based on their poor judgment and inexperience.

Credit Card Fraud

Lincoln Saunders unwisely issued city credit cards to employees with insufficient controls. It was a disaster with much fraud and abuse. Saunders feebly claimed that only a few percent were used fraudulently, but it's perhaps hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Violating City Charter

Stoney early-on appointed his friend, Lincoln Saunders as chief administrative officer (CAO). Saunderson's appointment violated the city charter because Saunders was spectacularly unqualified, untrained, and lacked any experience for the position required by the city charter.

Erroneous Satisfaction Report?

On his way out of office, Stoney seemed to fabricate a tall story suggesting Richmond citizens are satisfied with their poorly run government. He used \$50k of taxpayer money to have a consulting firm write a 130 page report, however everyone knows this government is badly broken, with the greatest state of dysfunction in 40 years. There is a fact which most citizens and City Council don't know: Richmond spends hundreds of \$ millions annually more than similar Virginia cities like Norfolk to deliver the same services, even adjusted per capita or per citizen. We deserve to know why. <https://www.apa.virginia.gov/local-government/reports?type=comparative-reports>

Much Hope for Richmond and New Mayor Danny Avula

Let us hope that Mayor Avula will have the insight, wisdom, and good judgment to reverse many of the practices implemented by Levar Stoney and Lincoln Saunders. Dr. Avula surely knows that for Richmond government to become high performing, he must first and foremost, change the culture from criticism, punishment, and secrecy to a culture of appreciation, reward, and transparency.

Please join me in a spirit of hope, recognizing the potential for the first rate city that Richmond can be, if only Mayor-Elect Avula can implement many positive changes.

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