



Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOIA)

A non-profit, non-partisan, volunteer-run organization

Help Wanted

Who would be crazy enough to take the position as a CEO of a 65-year-old organization that was losing money, had significant challenges with staff morale and recruitment, and had a politically divided Board of Directors who at times provided inconsistent and diverging direction? And where the predecessor CEO in the position created what some would characterize as a hostile environment among customers, employees, and the Board. Furthermore, the individual who previously held the job was terminated by the Board, in part for not taking direction from the Board nor listening to the organization's customers. And if someone were crazy enough to take the job, would that person even be any good, or would the job only attract someone who really wasn't capable of undertaking the very challenging job of getting the organization back on track?

You might be surprised (or not) to learn that we are talking about the City Manager position in Los Altos. While some might take issue with our rather harsh description above, nonetheless, finding someone to take on the challenges facing our town was not guaranteed to yield much. To our pleasant surprise it turns out to have resulted in the hiring of Gabe Engeland, who may turn out to be the best City Manager the town has ever had. Let us explain.

Without giving anyone the sense that we are giddy over Mr. Engeland's hire, let us first say that everyone with whom we've talked has had a similar, positive view of him. He brings decades of experience in city government, particularly in other cities with similar challenges. More importantly, he is bright, energetic and genuinely likes his job and he likes Los Altos. He is both a good listener and a doer. He is sensitive to the politics of the town, but also understands that good process, good staff work and good decisions need to be made in order for the City to prosper. While we are not privy to all the changes he plans to make, he has brought in new employees to City Hall and our guess is that he will continue to refine, supplement and make the changes necessary to enable the City to run better.

To date we are very impressed. Engeland's performance so far gives us optimism that Los Altos can emerge from some of the bad effects of Covid as well as some of the unfortunate decisions made by prior City Managers. Our hope is that Los Altos will become better and stronger over the next several years.

But it would be naïve of us to suggest there aren't some real challenges ahead. For example, just last week at the Financial Commission meeting, it was reported that under the prior City Manager and Director of Finance, the \$140K core accounting software system upgrade that was purchased circa 2018, intended to modernize our financial management system, will need to be replaced. It needs

replacement because it lacks the basic functionality to budget and track City expenses and link to various other systems like the external payroll provider and the permitting and business license systems.

Even the recently-completed Community Center presents management challenges for the new City Manager. There wasn't (and still isn't) a plan for how to staff and pay for the people to run the sprawling facility. Nor were there any plans for what programs that would be offered in the new facility. While we sincerely hope that Engeland and his new team don't find additional skeletons in the proverbial closet, we are nearing Halloween so expectations need to be kept in check!

So it is tempting to sit back and watch the play unfold. But there is an Achilles heel that could set Los Altos back (once again). Many of us on the FOLA Board had a front seat to City operations when Doug Schmitz was the City Manager and held the job from 2007-2012. Schmitz was arguably the best City Manager the City had had to date and was well liked by City Staff, the Council and the residents. Unfortunately, he decided to "retire" at the end of his 5-year contract with Los Altos. But the simple truth is that while he did retire (at least temporarily, before taking an interim role as City Manager of Carmel), he resigned because one City Council member insisted on continually micromanaging him, second guessing his decisions, and constantly trying to rearrange priorities.

The City Council needs to give Mr. Engeland enough time – to make personnel changes and to change the culture of the organization. Council needs to give him time to find the additional skeletons in the closet and trust him to take the right steps to fix what is broken, even when the natural inclination may be to do otherwise. While the Council does have a responsibility to interact with and oversee the City Manager, micromanaging him should not be standard Council practice. We sincerely hope that none of our current or future Council members behave in a similar way and give Engeland cause to leave.

Through good fortune, Los Altos now has a really good City Manager who may surprise us further and turn into a great City Manager. Right now he needs the full support of both the Council and the community.

And that is the way we see it.

Friends of Los Altos

Los Altos, CA 94022 & 94024

<https://friendsoflosaltos.org>