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Forsyth mayor, council take office

By Chuck Thompson - cthompson@macon.com

FORSYTH -- The new year began with a different group of leaders for the city and an early test for the new council and mayor about whether to reappoint the city's department heads for another year.

New Mayor Tye Howard and Councilmen Desi Hansford, Melvin Lawrence and James Calloway were sworn into office at the first City Council meeting of 2008 Wednesday evening.

They join three holdover council members, Mike Dodd, Lamar Russell and Rosemary Walker, who will be up for re-election in two years.

Almost immediately, Howard found himself having to break a 3-3 tie to reappoint the city's seven department heads and renew contracts with 13 individuals or firms that provide professional services for Forsyth.

After unanimously selecting Walker as mayor pro-tem and appointing the council members to committees for the coming year, the new council found itself at odds on reappointing the city's hired leaders.

Calloway presented a motion to wait 90 days before appointing all department heads and professional service contracts to give the new members of the council time to get to know and evaluate each leader.



Chuck Thompson/The Telegraph

Tye Howard, right, is sworn in as mayor of Forsyth by City Attorney Robert Melton.

2008 City Council Committees

- Administrative:** Rosemary Walker, chairwoman; Mike Dodd; Desi Hansford
- Cemetery, Parks & Recreation:** Dodd, chairman; Melvin Lawrence; Walker
- Ordinances & Zoning:** Hansford, chairman; Lawrence; Lamar Russell
- Public Safety:** Russell, chairman; James Calloway; Walker
- Public Utilities:** Calloway, chairman; Dodd; Hansford
- Public Works:** Lawrence, chairman; Calloway; Russell

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Lawrence seconded his motion, saying he also wanted time to "meet, relate with and evaluate" the department heads.

But Walker and Russell said it would be unfair to leave so many people uncertain about their future.

"These people need to know where they stand," Russell said. "We need to vote tonight. We've got good people working for us and we need to keep them."

Walker pointed out that even if all were reappointed the council would have the right to review any department head's performance at any time and fire them if they weren't performing their jobs correctly.

Hansford, who later said he would like to reappoint everyone for a year and then take the time to evaluate them, spoke up to say he would be willing to consider the department heads on an individual basis but not as a slate, so he voted with Walker, Russell and Dodd to defeat Calloway's motion.

Russell then made a motion to reappoint all of the department heads for 2008, and Dodd seconded. But this time, Hansford voted with Calloway and Lawrence, leaving the matter tied 3-3 and up to the new mayor to decide.

Howard also said he would be willing to discuss the matter department by department, but because the measure was presented as a full slate, he would vote with Walker, Russell and Dodd to reappoint the department heads and renew the professional services contracts.

"Who would have thought I'd have to break a tie in my first four years in office, much less the first night?" Howard said later. "I was surprised the matter came up the way it did, taking them all as a full slate. I couldn't do that when it affects 13, 14 people the way this does. You can't leave them hanging like that for 90 days."

Part of the reason Howard and the new council members won November's election over incumbent Mayor Jimmy Pace and council members Hal Clarke Jr., Sandra Dews and Chris Hewett was the ill feelings some residents had toward some city department heads, most notably Police Chief John Clifton and City Clerk Janice Hall.

All of the newcomers said Wednesday they aren't ready to replace anyone right now, but Calloway and Lawrence said they had wanted the 90-day period to give them a chance to make changes if needed.

But Howard said the way he understands the city contracts is that now, after Wednesday's reappointments, the city would have to pay anyone it replaces for a year unless it can show just cause for firing them earlier.

Along with Clifton and Hall, other department heads reappointed were Public Works Director Alvin Randall, Fire Chief Walter Carter, Electric Superintendent Johnny Hodges, Street Superintendent Willie Wright and Better Hometown Director Joan Heath.

Among those providing professional services who had their contracts renewed were municipal court Judges William Clifton III, Bryan Tiller and Jeff Davis, Solicitor Kristi Rowell, Public Defender Elmo Remick, City Attorney Robert Melton and city electrical utility engineer John Hewitt.

In other action Wednesday, the council awarded a \$389,415 contract (the lower of two bids) for a new belt press building at the sewage treatment plant to Tommy Griffin Plumbing of Macon.

And it heard an update on the Georgia Department of Corrections' work to relocate to the old Tift College campus and agreed to allow a portion of College Street to be closed to accommodate the plans.

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To contact writer Chuck Thompson, call 744-4489.

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