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Mayor-elect Carter is showing true leadership. Will our City Council?  
by Shirley Erstad

Melvin Carter III's election as St. Paul's first African American mayor is historic in its own right and well worth celebrating. However, it's more about the future of St. Paul than about Carter's legacy. Leaders come and leaders go; it's the impact of their leadership that makes a real difference in people's lives.

An article in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* on November 29, ("Some City Hall staffers on edge as St. Paul mayor-elect sets up hiring panels") spoke volumes between the lines. According to the article, some city department heads were "furious" that the mayor chose to form 10 hiring panels made up of community members to better inform his hiring decisions and that they learned about it in the press.

St. Paul, by charter, has a strong mayor system. The mayor appoints a deputy mayor, all city department heads except those exempted by law such as the police chief, and all deputy department heads. The mayor appoints the members of the St. Paul Planning Commission. That body takes testimony and makes recommendations to the mayor and City Council on such important and legally binding things as the city's zoning code. There are over 30 boards and commissions that serve under the mayor. The mayor makes personnel appointment recommendations, and the City Council votes on those recommendations. In reality, almost all the folks the mayor wants to appoint are appointed.

For example, the Planning Commission has 21 seats. One third of those seats are open after January 1, 2018. If the current mayor and City Council do not fill those seats either by appointment or re-appointment before then, Mayor-elect Carter will be appointing the new people to the Planning Commission, which is only right. It's his administration and he'll be judged by their work, so he should be filling those seats.

Political appointees serve at the pleasure of the mayor. Any and all appointees, if they're doing their job right, should be approaching their tenure as a service to the public and should wake up every day knowing that they'll be held accountable to that job description. The taxpayers pay the salaries of the mayor, the deputy mayor, the City Council, the department heads and their entire staffs. We literally pay for the decisions they make and the time they take making them. It's easy to feel as if that's been forgotten.

Look at the upcoming vote on a resolution before the City Council on December 6. At issue is whether or not the City Council will allow the Ford site masterplan decision to be put on the ballot for the voters to decide. The resolution has 16 "whereas" and five "be it resolved" statements explaining why voters should be shut out of the process. The petition to put it on the ballot has nearly 3,000 signatures, gathered in a very short period of time.

If we really are "The Most Livable City in America" and our city leaders still embrace the idea that they serve to represent the taxpaying public, then the City Council should not adopt the resolution and its legal mumbo jumbo "whereas" and "resolved" statements to make the Ford site master plan an internal decision. Rather, our elected and appointed officials should welcome community engagement, conversation, and yes, healing around this issue.

One could argue that the Ford site decision is actually something that should be before all the voters of Ramsey County, not just St. Paul. There is over \$250 million of tax increment financing (TIF) on the table. Whenever St. Paul subsidizes developers with TIF, it takes money

away from the school district and the county, too. In effect, we take from our children and the poorest among us to benefit those who arguably may not need it. That's the true Ford site discussion that our city leaders should be embracing, not attempting to squelch.

A big thank-you to our incoming mayor for reminding us of what leadership looks like. May he and those around him wake up every morning embracing what it truly means to serve.

*Shirley Erstad wrote this piece as a member of the St. Paul STRONG Steering Committee.*