

**CITY OF GAUTIER  
OFFICE OF THE CITY MANAGER**

**DATE:** March 24, 2016

**TO:** Honorable Mayor Gordon Gollott and Council Members

**FROM:** Samantha D. Abell, City Manager

**SUBJECT:** Consideration of the City Manager's succession plan for the eventual appointment of Robert Jones as Interim City Manager

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**REQUEST:**

The proposed succession plan will allow the City Manager to begin an orderly and smooth transition for the eventual appointment of Fire Chief Robert Jones as Interim City Manager.

**BACKGROUND:**

Gautier is the second youngest city in the state, only 29 years old. An official succession plan is important to ensure that projects and programs move forward, and that procedures for internal accountability become institutional memory by repetition over time, even as executive leadership transitions.

Fire Chief Robert Jones is a 27-year employee, Gautier's Emergency Operations Commander and Hazard Mitigation Representative. Chief Jones is integral to the continued progress of the Gautier team. He has increasingly tackled regional issues, serving in leadership roles with regional and state agencies. Most significantly, Chief Jones is a dependable administrator with a pacesetter management approach.

The succession plan ensures risk mitigation and provides the framework for continued progress towards objectives, in a healthy and prosperous organization. The Plan follows best practices of the International City Managers Association (ICMA).

**DISCUSSION:**

The need for a succession plan is self-evident. In Gautier's short history, the City has suffered economic setbacks due to disruptions both internal and external. Resiliency is the strength to recover. Organizational resilience is the ability of a city to quickly adapt to leadership

disruptions while maintaining continuous service operations and safeguarding employees and assets from political maneuvering and workplace uncertainties.

The hallmark of City Manager Abell’s administration has been a transparent and resilient organization, poised for growth. Benchmarks include reorganized departments based on an assessment of Gautier’s history, readiness, and capacity to change. Organizational planning efforts include a revised Unified Development Ordinance to implement the 2030 Comprehensive Plan, Gautier’s 5-Year Strategic Plan with annual updates, the Council-Manager Roles and Responsibilities Handbook, the annual Capital Improvement Plan, the Legislative Priorities Packet, and incentives for economic development which include the corridor overlay district, town center redevelopment plan, and retail sales tax abatement ordinance, in addition to development master plans which include the parks and recreation masterplan, the East Lake Commerce and Technology Park, and Town Center—all of which were drafted or facilitated in-house.

The City Manager was appointed February 20, 2012, and previously served as Economic Development/Planning Director since June 1, 2010. The City Manager’s recruitment focused on her expertise as a change manager, solving specific challenges and achieving clearly defined organizational and economic goals. Long-term structural transformation depends on consistency over time, so that individual employees gain institution memory. The administration goals within the Strategic Plan have been achieved, presenting a natural transition for city management succession.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

The City Council may:

1. Approve the city manager’s request for a succession plan
2. Not approve the city manager’s request for a succession plan

*Mayor  
Gordon F. Gallott*

# *City of Gautier*

## *Gautier, Mississippi*

*City Manager  
Samantha D. Abell*

*City Clerk  
Cynthia L. Russell*

*Council  
At Large Mary F. Martin  
Ward 1 Johnny Jones  
Ward 2 Hurley Ray Guillotte  
Ward 3 Casey C. Vaughan  
Ward 4 Charles "Rusty" Anderson  
Ward 5 Adam D. Colledge*



*3330 Highway 90  
Gautier, MS 39553  
Phone: (228) 497-8000  
Fax: (228) 497-8028  
Email: [gautier@gautier-ms.gov](mailto:gautier@gautier-ms.gov)  
Website: [www.gautier-ms.gov](http://www.gautier-ms.gov)*

March 31, 2016

Council,

Good afternoon. I've now served as Gautier's city manager for four years and two months, and economic development/planning director for nearly two years prior to appointment. I stepped into the position at the encouragement of department directors. The support along the Coast has been immense.

Citizens want one of two things from their government: Stability and/or growth. Upon my appointment, I promised Gautier that I would be a change manager. Long-term structural transformation has been the cornerstone of my administration. As a team, we started out with a plan to tackle a 24 year-old city that had endured natural disasters, a global recession and political turmoil and financial missteps resulting in a city corporation in disarray.

Structural transformation was needed to put in place the plans, procedures, systems, and controls necessary for accountability and performance. This includes ensuring that duties are properly delineated, both between the political board and the employees.

I have appointed all new directors during my tenure. Together, we have facilitated a revised Unified Development Ordinance to implement the 2030 Comprehensive Plan, Gautier's 5-Year Strategic Plan with annual updates, the Council-Manager Roles and Responsibilities Handbook, the annual Capital Improvement Plan, the Legislative Priorities Packet, and incentives for economic development which include the corridor overlay district, town center redevelopment plan, and a retail sales tax abatement ordinance, in addition to development master plans which include the Parks and Recreation Master Plan, the East Lake Commerce and Technology Park, and Town Center and Town Commons Master Plan—all of which were drafted or facilitated in-house.

Gautier has been recognized for four years in a row by the Mississippi Municipal League and Mississippi Economic Development Council for our city's progress for resiliency. Gone are the days of budget mistakes totaling well over \$500,000 for three years in a row by as many city clerks, a police department being investigated by outside agencies, a fire department hiring lawyers just to be heard, meter readers "estimating" accounts, citizens receiving adjustments at the window, the federal government auditing procurement procedures to find \$3.8 million in federal funds improperly spent,

*"Nature's Playground!"*

a planning department with poor software and even worse training and support, and a parks department consisting of one employee.

Today, the city has turned the corner from its economic downturn. Sales tax is trending upward, thanks to growing existing businesses. Transformative projects like the Bienville Medical Park at East Lake and yes, the Town Center Shopping Venues on the previous mall site, will ensure Gautier's future sustainability. All department directors have access at their fingertips to their department expenses, and directors are integral in developing and managing department budgets, as well as executive decision-making, throughout the year. The city has a Human Resources Department which is responsible for risk management and updating the Employee Policy Handbook, adopted upon my appointment and the first employee policy handbook in seven years. The city also has a new Cultural Services Department and hopefully will approve a referendum on the general ballot so that Gautier is no longer the only city in Jackson County without a percentage of sales tax dedicated to recreation. Katrina loans have been forgiven, franchise agreements and all city contracts have all been assessed, re-negotiated or terminated, and old utility debt has been refinanced for a savings of \$900,000 towards the purchase of the state's first ion exchange water filtration system.

Change is disruptive. It is important to know when to manage tensions and when there are problems which must be solved. With so much disarray, change was certain. Using a systematic, comprehensive framework, our managers understood what to expect, how to make their own personal change, and how to engage their employees in the process. And now these changes must become institutional memory.

Gautier must repeat the same procedural steps year after year, until procedures become first nature. These include: A budget season that includes needs assessments from department directors, budget white papers for the public, updating the 5-Year Strategic Plan, reviewing personnel policies and procedures, updating department operating procedures, annual evaluations between council and appointed positions, and supervisors and employees, and so on. This is how a community keeps its eyes on where it's going, and adapts as significant needs arise. This is how a community becomes resilient, and bounces back quickly from life's unexpected surprises.

There is one plan left for me to offer the City of Gautier. It is necessary to ensure that structural transformation becomes institutional memory.

It is important to me as your city manager that Gautier experiences a positive and professional city manager succession plan, worthy of its place as the 22<sup>nd</sup> largest city in the state. Gautier is looking forward, and a smooth transition from change management to internal consistency is vital. A succession plan provides certainty to an often uncertain process.

On your April 5<sup>th</sup> agenda, I ask that you approve a succession plan for your city manager, so that I may begin a smooth transition to hand off my duties and responsibilities to Robert Jones. It is time for me to consider other possible career opportunities. Upon my departure, the city council will have a

capable and prepared interim city manager for the remainder of your term, from amongst an executive team that works well together and is positioned for success. The council has an excellent relationship with Robert. I am pleased to say that Robert has the unanimous support of all directors, and will experience the same encouragement and support that I have received from directors and management during my six years.

In service,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Samantha D. Abell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

Samantha D. Abell

A City Manager  
Succession Plan  
for  
Gautier, MS

**A CHECK LIST  
OF FORWARD  
BENCHMARKS  
TO ENSURE A  
SMOOTH  
TRANSITION AND  
ORGANIZATION  
RESILIENCY  
DURING THE  
TRANSITION TO  
AN INTERIM CITY  
MANAGER**



3330 Highway 90  
Gautier, MS 39553  
228.497.8000 ph

email [gautier-ms.gov](mailto:gautier-ms.gov)  
web [www.gautier-ms.gov](http://www.gautier-ms.gov)



## > Introduction

Pursuant to Mississippi Annotated Code 21-9-1, the City Manager is the Chief Executive Officer for a Council-Manager Form of Government. This checklist is meant as a guide for Interim City Managers for the City of Gautier.

The Gautier City Manager Succession Plan follows best practices of the International City Managers Association (ICMA).

A major strategic concept underpins the key benchmarks listed:

- Resiliency is the strength to recover. Organizational resilience is the ability of a city to quickly adapt to leadership disruptions while maintaining continuous service operations and safeguarding employees and assets from political maneuvering and workplace uncertainties.
- A City Manager/CEO vacancy can be planned or unplanned; in either scenario, it is the responsibility of the city council to make succession planning a priority, even in the face of more immediate and tangible issues. In addition to being necessary for risk mitigation, succession planning brings with it several beneficial byproducts:
  - ✓ It provides a framework that drives management, continuing the implementation of the 5-year strategic plan and long-term objectives, in spite of transition.
  - ✓ It gives the City Manager/CEO, the opportunity to hand off imperatives such as ongoing economic development initiatives, public agreements, capital projects, and sensitive political initiatives.
  - ✓ It strengthens the relationship and information flow between the city council and the senior management team.
  - ✓ It reinforces the continuance of organizational procedures and productivity, in spite of leadership change.

**A Checklist of Forward Benchmarks**

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The forward benchmarks are delineated by transition phase, and within each phase there are checklists related to change activities and to transition needs.

It should be noted that the phases are overlapping as a change unfolds; the three phases do not have discrete endings.

Lastly, for the purposes of this Plan, the executive management team refers to department directors and their direct-report managers responsible for administration.



Prologue

**ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES**

- \_\_\_ Approval of the “Gautier City Manager Succession Plan” to guide expectations for change and transition work
- \_\_\_ Appointment of Interim City Manager/CEO
- \_\_\_ Designation of department director transition roles to ensure full staff input and involvement in the change and transition process



Phase I

**A GOOD ENDING WITH THE DEPARTING CITY MANAGER**

*CHANGE ACTIVITIES*

*Events, outcome focused, relatively quick.*

- \_\_\_ Setting a departure date for the City Manager/CEO
- \_\_\_ Allowing time for public goodbyes and introductions of the Interim City Manager to key stakeholders and parties of ongoing initiatives.

*TRANSITION ACTIVITIES*

*Process-based, gradual. Attending to the inner reorientation process that teams go through when some change requires them to stop doing things the way they used to, and start doing them differently*

- \_\_\_ Establishing regular communications between the departing city manager and interim city manager.
- \_\_\_ Acknowledging the skills and achievements of the departing city manager
- \_\_\_ Advocating the skills and potential of the interim city manager, to reinforce procedures to the team, and manage the implementation of the council's strategic plan.



> Phase II

**THE INTERIM MANAGEMENT ZONE**

*CHANGE ACTIVITIES*

- \_\_\_ Interim City Manager conducts unofficial organizational assessment:
  - Strengths & weaknesses
  - Opportunities & threats
  - Priority challenges & opportunities
  - Adequacy of Council policy governance
  - Work culture
  - Goals for interim city manager given timeframe until re-elections
- \_\_\_ Attend to interim organizational upgrades

*TRANSITION ACTIVITIES*

- \_\_\_ Acknowledge the instability & chaos inherent in transitions; *create temporary solutions*
- \_\_\_ Engage the Council and the staff executive management in this *Transition Management Plan*
- \_\_\_ Closely engage the staff executive management in setting any necessary interim procedures & rules, e.g. decision making
- \_\_\_ Communicate profusely with all key stakeholders– staff, funders, volunteers, clients
- \_\_\_ Tap into the creative side of the neutral zone
  - Step back, take stock, challenge accepted answers
  - Search situation for clues and messages
  - Solicit new ideas from everyone
  - Encourage experiments
  - If the future doesn't exist, create it

A Checklist of Forward Benchmarks

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\_\_\_ Facilitate movement to the new beginning

    Permit & facilitate emotional difficulties with leadership change

    Deal with any anxiety that emerges as a result of the changes

    Focus on agency mission & future vision



### Phase III

#### **THE NEW BEGINNING WITH THE NEW CITY MANAGER**

##### *CHANGE ACTIVITIES*

- \_\_\_ Conduct orientation & welcoming ceremonies
- \_\_\_ Establish Council support & feedback
- \_\_\_ Negotiate initial performance goals
- \_\_\_ Agree on a performance evaluation protocol
- \_\_\_ Create/Amend ongoing Council communication patterns, e.g. “Gautier Council-Manager Rules and Responsibilities Handbook”.
- \_\_\_ Plan for City Manager skill development, especially for first-time City Manager
  - Set professional development goals
  - Connect with professional support mechanisms/ICMA Membership
  - Peer group memberships
- \_\_\_ Celebrate the successful transition; acknowledge accomplishments of all parties
  
- \_\_\_ *Facilitate the new beginning:* Develop the strategies for implementing changes necessary for achieving the updated vision & goals
- \_\_\_ Become the facilitative leader of the staff management team
- \_\_\_ Address challenges identified in organizational audit
- \_\_\_ Understand agency work culture and be strategic in making any needed changes
- \_\_\_ Connect with stakeholders
- \_\_\_ Engage the previous City Manager and the interim City Manager as appropriate

A Checklist of Forward Benchmarks

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*TRANSITION ACTIVITIES*

- Facilitate Council Work-sessions for 5 year update of Strategic Plan.
- Communicate profusely
- Seek input & feedback on changes as they are planned & implemented
- Reinforce rules, procedures, political and administrative boundaries
- Acknowledge ongoing changes & the time and process needed for the concomitant transitions