Guest Opinion: Palo Alto's next manager should follow Frank Benest's regionalism
by Russell Hancock

With Frank Benest's impending departure Palo Alto is losing more than a gifted city manager. We're losing a major force for regionalism.

I'm a longtime Palo Altan and, like most everybody I know, I appreciate Benest — Frank — for running our city with a sure hand and a big-picture managerial approach. I especially appreciate having a manager who always spoke truth to power.

But that's not why I'm motivated to write this guest opinion.

I'm deeply affected by the courage and fortitude Frank showed during times of intense personal tragedy — his wife's untimely death and his own diagnosis with cancer — and from what I can tell he kept the city running smoothly through all of it.

But that's not my reason either.

Instead I'm writing to thank and praise Frank for something that might escape many Palo Altans, and to urge the City Council to look for these same qualities in our next manager.

That would be Frank's steadfast commitment to the region.

Frank's vision of Palo Alto extends beyond our city boundaries. He considers Palo Alto a citizen of Silicon Valley and the greater Bay Area, and understands that our well-being is intricately intertwined with the well-being of our neighbors.

I think many Palo Altans fail to appreciate how the solutions to so many of our problems — transportation, housing, infrastructure, economic development, disaster planning and the environment, just to name a few — have a profoundly regional dimension and are best worked out through complex regional accords.

Sadly, ours is a region without any real framework for this kind of decision-making, which is why so many of the outcomes around us are haphazard or, worse, Darwinian.

But to his great credit Frank has never taken the Darwinist approach. He has consistently chosen collaborative approaches over competitive ones, reaching out to his manager colleagues, serving on regional bodies and championing cross-jurisdictional initiatives.

Economic development is one interesting example. When Frank arrived in Palo Alto he was surprised to see Silicon Valley cities locked in competition, poaching corporations from each other, viewing the whole business of site selection as a zero-sum game. Frank thinks that approach is simplistic and misguided. He argued that cities would fare better by making sure the Silicon Valley economy overall was humming, and by banding together to accomplish it.
Accordingly, Frank helped broker regional approaches to everything from permit streamlining to uniform building codes to cell phone coverage. He even organized a task force of 19 cities between San Francisco and San Jose working to improve the look and function of El Camino Real.

To this day Frank chairs the Silicon Valley Economic Development Alliance, a group of 28 Silicon Valley cities who work for the benefit of the region rather than their own narrowly defined interests.

A win for one is considered a win for all, and that sums up Frank's whole approach.

Frank has also championed collective approaches to the provision of infrastructure. Why, for example, should every city develop its own wireless network? Frank argued we should do it on a regional scale, sharing model ordinances, creating economies of scale and returning cost savings to the taxpayer. He has been a proponent of a 40-city effort to do exactly this.

This same spirit has guided Frank with our immediate neighbors. Whether we're talking about flood control, emergency management or public safety, Frank has never taken the me-first approach. He has consistently tackled these issues in a spirit of total partnership with Menlo Park, East Palo Alto and Stanford.

It's no accident, of course, that the new Opportunity Center is located in Palo Alto. It is a regional facility serving a regional function, but Frank was eager for it to be located here.

Frank has also articulated the importance of cities sticking together to advocate their collective interest in Sacramento and Washington D.C. He has served as an officer in the national and regional city managers associations, and been an active member of the League of California Cities.

Bear in mind that none of this actually appears in Frank's job description, and these sorts of activities probably haven't been a factor in his annual review, either. In fact, it's a good bet when the council members write up their specs for the new recruiter they will describe somebody who is a competent internal administrator.

That would be a mistake. Palo Alto needs much more. External relations have become as important as internal ones. Palo Alto's biggest issues cut across jurisdictions and won't be solved on our own.

We've been lucky to have a manager like Frank who understands all this instinctively and has an enormous talent for collaboration. We'll never find another Frank, but if we're wise we'll insist on another regionalist as our next city manager.

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