

Richmond City Manager Bill Lindsay to retire



City Manager Bill Lindsay listens to speakers during a council meeting, which started late, at the City Council Chambers in Richmond, Calif., on Tuesday, May 6, 2014. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

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RICHMOND — City Manager Bill Lindsay, who is credited with helping to pull Richmond out of financial ruin, has announced he will retire later this year.

Lindsay, 62, is leaving Richmond on July 31 and said he is not looking for another job.

“I came to Richmond because I wanted a challenge,” Lindsay said Thursday. “Richmond certainly offered that.”

A former city manager of Orinda, Lindsay arrived in Richmond in 2005, recruited by former Contra Costa County Administrator Phil Batchelor, who served as interim city manager. He entered a city that looked much different — in budget reports and around city streets and buildings — than the one he is leaving.

In 2005, a crippling \$35 million budget crisis because of mismanagement resulted in the departures of key department heads and layoffs of 300 employees, which was

nearly a third of the city's workforce, while the city closed libraries and other centers. On top of that, the city struggled with its notorious violent crime rate.

"The goals were to get the city's finances back on track and get the city's services so they were at least stable and something to build on," Lindsay said. And to "try to drive out the fear that was pervasive in the organization. I remember that being a significant factor and obstacle to getting things done. Employees were fearful they would lose their job."

Lindsay is credited with balancing the budget in his first three years, and he will leave the city with a current budget he estimates will again have a surplus. Mayor Tom Butt, in an email to residents, said Lindsay steered the city through the Great Recession, rebuilt the Civic Center and helped attract new businesses.

"Lindsay will be leaving Richmond at the top of his game, with the lowest unemployment rate in history, diminishing violent crime ... a balanced budget, growing reserves and an upward trending reputation," Butt wrote.

The city's current unemployment rate is 3.6 percent, according to Lindsay, and violent crime has dropped, with homicides dropping to 11 in 2014, the lowest total on record dating to 1971.

Perhaps his most memorable hire was Chief Chris Magnus, an outsider and reformer who came from Fargo, North Dakota. Reached by phone, the now-Tucson, Arizona, chief said Lindsay stood behind him after investigating claims from seven African-American officers who alleged Magnus was racially biased. The case was eventually dropped after a four-month trial.

"He really stood behind me, and that wasn't always easy to do," Magnus said. "I could never of hung in there and focused on policing and bringing down the level of violent crime and making the changes we made without his support."

Lindsay's tenure also saw great turnover on the Richmond City Council, as the majority of members switched from Chevron-backed candidates to progressive members of the Richmond Progressive Alliance. Butt is the only current council member who sat on the dais when Lindsay arrived.

"He had the full confidence of both factions on the council," remembered Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia. "It's not always unanimous, but I think he was respected by all. If only the public knew how much he has benefited residents of Richmond."

After years of spending nights at city and community meetings, Lindsay said he is looking forward to spending more time with his wife, Meg.

“I came here with my eyes wide open and hoped that I could help,” he said. “ I hope that I have.”