

New city manager aims to shake things up

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MASON COUNTY LIFE

Trust, service and performance — these are the principles that Ryan Wheaton wants the City of Shelton to embody, and with four months under his belt as the new city manager, Wheaton has made strides toward making those ideals a reality.

Wheaton has already ushered in several internal changes and encouraged the City Council to be more honest and financially accountable. Most recently, Wheaton recommended, and the council agreed, that the city should return grant funds for projects it had been ill-prepared to take on.

“We have established a bad reputation for getting projects done,” Wheaton said. “Folks have seen in the last decade that we’ve promised things we can’t get done. The real test is, can we get things done in the future that we say we’re going to get done? This will be the expectation.”

Wheaton is the latest local public figure to head a local organization ready for change — Shelton Police Chief Darrin Moody and Shelton School Dis-

trict Superintendent Dr. Alex Apostle set the tone for great things to come in Shelton since they came to town in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

Moody and Apostle were “selling points” to Wheaton, who grew up in Shelton and visited periodically before his hire, and their eagerness to change Shelton for the better encouraged Wheaton to join the city.

“Darrin and Alex brought something new to this area and were looking to make real improvements in their respective fields,” he said. “There’s also Dannette (Brannin) at Mason Transit Authority and Wendy (Smith) at the Port of Shelton. From my perspective, it’s a good situation to step into.”

Wheaton graduated from Shelton High School in 1997, attended Colorado State University for a degree in political science, obtained a master’s in education from the University of Northern Colorado and earned a master’s in business administration from Pacific Lutheran University.

In between school, he also worked for three years as a middle school



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Ryan Wheaton is Shelton’s new city manager. Wheaton’s decisive actions are already shaking up the city.

teacher in Denver, studied for three semesters as a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska, where he also worked as a teaching assistant, and worked as an administrator in the Steilacoom Historical School District.

Wheaton worked for two years at Pierce Transit in business development, all the while visiting his family every so often in his hometown with his wife and family.

The job at the City of Shelton appealed to him because he wanted to make a difference back home.

“I could come home and with my background in public service and the private sector, I could be a good fit,” he said. “I was excited for a leadership role in my hometown, for the opportunity to come back and do something positive. I didn’t know when I’d get that opportunity again.”

After joining the city and meeting with staff and the community, Wheaton’s motivations

for the job somewhat shifted.

“It dawned on me how much people were ready for change,” he said. “I met with a lot of people I admire who were very vocal in wanting to see the city change. Those are people in the community and people here. You can’t ask for anything better when you’re coming in as a new leader.”

The city’s stagnant growth over the past decade and sluggish progress on completing projects such as the Pear Orchard Highway 3 Park and Ride and the Safe Routes project for safer paths to school for Evergreen Elementary students earned the city a poor reputation.

“There hasn’t been a lot of growth, so to take one of these jobs, you have to have a certain type of mindset,” Wheaton said. “You have to be the type of person who wants to push for change.”

Wheaton revamped what was formerly the Community and Economic Development Depart-

ment and now the Community Development Department, with new Director Mark Ziegler, formerly head of the Parks Department. Parks and Planning are now divisions within Community Development.

“We’re just trying to be honest with people,” Wheaton said. “We haven’t done economic development, business recruitment or business retention in years.”

Wheaton wanted to combine departments that were similar and move Ziegler into a leadership position.

“Mark brings a skill set that is sorely needed in that department,” he said. “He understands how to get things done and he knows everybody in town. He has a management style where he sets expectations and expects follow-through. And he’s willing to expand his knowledge.”

Ziegler is also someone that the community trusts, Wheaton added, owing to his extensive involvement in bringing parks projects to fruition with the help of local partnerships.

The city also promoted Craig Gregory to head the Public Works Department (he formerly worked as the public works superintendent), backfilled other open positions in Public Works with experienced staff and hired Nola von Neudegg as finance director.

“Police and Public Works are our strongest departments, and so Public Works did not miss a beat with the transitions,” Wheaton said. “Nola brings a different level of professionalism and leadership style to finance that we haven’t seen in awhile. She’s helping them work as a team.”

Wheaton wants the city to home in on several pri-

orities for 2017, including creating a vision statement and strategic goals, developing an economic development plan with a budgeted part-time economic development analyst and completing ongoing projects.

The city will pay back grants that were awarded for the Pear Orchard Highway 3 Park and Ride, the Evergreen Safe Routes and the Downtown Creeks projects, the latter of which was a project intended to rebuild sidewalks on Franklin Street to allow pedestrians to view the creek below.

“We’d been telling people we were going to get these projects done for years, in the Pear Orchard case, more than 17 years,” Wheaton said. “Downtown Creeks was half funded. We couldn’t make a recommendation to continue a project knowing full well we didn’t have the money.”

The city will return the grant money to Local Programs, a state agency that distributes federal grant dollars and will return all remaining federal funds and pay back \$63,456.83 that had been used on the Downtown Creek project.

Wheaton said the city had already developed a reputation for lack of follow-through on projects with Local Programs and that the city’s renewed honesty with the agency will allow everyone to move forward.

“What we’re paying back is minuscule compared to what we can get in the next 10 to 20 years,” he said. “They’ve been very, very understanding. But we’ve been holding money back from other municipalities that can get things done.”

Wheaton was a student at Evergreen Elementary and particularly regrets

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