
Managing to Make a Difference

Oscar S. Rodriguez

Now's the time for my next career move. Three and a half years as an assistant city manager in Del Rio is a good tenure. The city has benefited from my work, and I've gained invaluable experience from serving it. I've completed all the projects I started, and I've achieved all the personal goals I set for myself when I joined the city. I've won a collegial relationship with the city manager and my staff. If I leave the organization now, I'll give it plenty of time to adjust and find my replacement before the peak of the municipal business cycle.

So what should be my next move? Which way to success? Which way to failure? You know the traditional path. A position as an assistant city manager with a larger city or as a city manager in an equal size or smaller city in a totally different region to the north should be the goal. This will give the resumé personal upward movement, breadth, and a mainstream look. Get away from the U.S.-Mexico border now that you have served there—you risk typecasting yourself. Avoid cities that have a history of either political instability or management by other than career managers. A city like Eagle Pass, which has never had a presence in either ICMA or the state managers association, should certainly not be my next career move.

These were my thoughts several weeks after I learned about the city manager position vacancy in Eagle Pass, Texas. Now almost a year after I moved there, I have grown ever more satisfied that I did not follow that initial line of thinking. My belief that a superficial impression does not tell all about a city has been proven correct. I am also learning that the same may hold true about a career.

Eagle Pass Offered Opportunities

Moving to Eagle Pass, located 60 miles south of Del Rio on the Rio Grande River, was not an easy decision. There were many reasons not to go. The welfare of my family had to be considered. There were other, less risky and more remunerative alternatives. Nevertheless, Eagle Pass offered opportunities of a different kind. It offered an opportunity to make a difference in life. Once I was able to negotiate a certain measure of security for my fam-

ily, Eagle Pass began to fit into my career plans.

A unique community of 40,000, Eagle Pass stands immediately across the Texas-Mexico border from the Mexican industrial city of Piedras Negras, Coahuila. Its history steeped with the lore of the Confederacy, trade with Mexico, and strong-willed leaders, Eagle Pass has a certain presence on the political landscape.

The city enjoys many natural strengths. Its land port location has been yielding the greatest results lately, bringing to Eagle Pass's sister city a boom in manufacturing and trade. The surrounding coal and petroleum fields have also played significant roles in the local economy. Today new technologies have introduced horizontal drilling to the oil industry and have converted the nearby oil fields into some of the hottest spots in the oil business. The Rio Grande River is another outstanding resource. It remains unspoiled and majestic at Eagle Pass, nurturing a fertile valley that Eagle Passans proudly call the Texas Winter Garden. As the city continues to grow over

Oscar Rodriguez is city manager of Eagle Pass, Texas.

the sprawling hills that lead to the bottom of this valley, the river's esthetic presence and value as a source for water recreation will also grow.

Rich as it is in natural attributes, Eagle Pass today is otherwise quite poor. The drop-out rate in the public schools stands at a devastating 40 percent. Unemployment, traditionally high, has reached up to 30 percent in recent years. Family income lies in the bottom 10 percent in the country. Hunger, in terms documented in 1989 by Mickey Leland's Congressional Committee, is suffered by a large part of the local population. All this and the volatility in the border economy have limited capital investment and kept the community from taking greater advantage of its natural strengths. What investment has been made in public capital projects is owed for the most part to federal grant programs.

City government played only a small role in the development of the community until the 1960s when it became the vehicle for the implementation of federal programs. Since then, the city has come to be looked upon for leadership in urban and economic development. Since employment and public works opportunities have not been forthcoming in the way they are needed, the city government's leadership role has been a heavy burden to bear. The city organization has had very little time to mature and has had to do so under difficult conditions. The community has negotiated the situation well, but has allowed only a slow introduction of disinterested, apolitical administration to city hall.

Eagle Pass Offered Challenges

I am now beginning to understand the situation, but at the time I looked into the city manager position in Eagle Pass, only the least promising view was available to me. I saw that the outgoing city manager had been the city's mayor in the 1970s. The present mayor had been the city manager in the early 1980s. This told me that in the public's mind there was little difference between administration and politics at city hall.

I also saw a five-member city council, which promised to split on its appointment of a new manager, and I knew that within six months all three of the working majority faced an election. This told me of a situation that would only grow in volatility before the new manager could submit the first budget.

Many other potential manager candidates saw the same liabilities and did not apply, making for a thin pool of candidates. This told me that the city enjoyed little recognition in the management profession. Accepting the manager position there would mean serving at or near the professional "sticks."

On this seemingly fragile groundwork, the new city manager would be expected to build support for addressing some very challenging issues, including the relocation and expansion of the central wastewater treatment and collection system, acquisition of a new central computer and modernization of the financial accounting system, provision of utilities to more than 10,000 families living outside the city limits in illegal subdivisions, and other complex issues related to serving a rapidly growing community on the border. Indeed, it seemed that only the allure of adventure or simple naiveté could make the position attractive. To some extent, both of these motivations kept me from ruling out the idea, but the need to make a difference in life and a calling to do it in a community like Eagle Pass brought my career priorities into focus. Once I convinced myself that "I can do this job," the obligation to try it began to grow.

I discussed the move with my family. My wife and I met in college through involvement in extracurricular activities that promoted social justice. We always thought of each other as being committed to our ideals. As we considered Eagle Pass, we saw that it challenged this commitment. Finally, it was decided that Eagle Pass was where we should go. I submitted my resumé on the day before the deadline. Three months later, I was offered the job.

"I Feel Good"

Today I feel good about my decision to go to Eagle Pass. I am seeing all the challenges I expected, but I am quite happily also seeing that solutions are possible. Plans for the new wastewater treatment plant are near completion. The request for proposals on the new computer and financial accounting system is taking shape, along with a new attitude toward financial management and public disclosure among the staff. Plans are also being drawn in earnest to address the many illegal subdivisions ringing the city, and the entire subdivision process is getting an overhaul. The divisions within the council remain unchanged, with an approaching election causing tensions to build. I know I would be out of place to try anything in this arena. My role is to ensure that the staff will not enter it either, and it is being said that even on this front there is improvement.

Every morning I go to work set on making something happen. At night I leave city hall content that things are improving. I am discovering that indeed there exists a determined and able citizenry that is anxious to help its city do better. Any city manager who would have come here would have found the same. I feel fortunate it was I. **PM**