

## A Trammart News interview with Greg Ellis, former Independence city manager

Pictured: The Independence Library; Inset is Greg Ellis, who served as Independence city manager for 10 years before taking the same role at Canby



As the library's Friday closure looms, Trammart News asked former Independence City Manager Greg Ellis to weigh in on the city he has called home for decades.

By Anne Scheck  
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*Meet Greg Ellis if you don't already know him. He's a former independence city manager who left the city in 2010 to take a job in Canby. Eventually, Ellis worked for both Gov. John Kitzhaber and Gov. Kate Brown. He also served as city manager for Estacada and Dallas, and as interim city manager for Jefferson. In a far-ranging interview with Trammart News, he agreed to answer questions about Independence – the town where he still lives – with the eloquence and candor he was known for in the city's top job.*

**TN:** I remember your time as city manager. But I am having a hard time characterizing your success – you didn't socialize a lot publicly, but you did seem to have a lot of touchpoints. How would you explain it?

**Ellis:** Maybe as a gadfly! In the city manager's job you do have to be social, but maybe in a different way than being out in a crowd. I always tried to be at the table when decisions were made. I did want people to see me out there, engaged. I went to meetings, like the Independence Downtown Association and the Chamber of Commerce – so many events and meetings. It helped me in so many ways.

**TN:** In what ways, specifically?

**Ellis:** I think you build respect just by showing up, by being there, by hearing things you might never hear otherwise, sometimes just in the course of everyday conversations.

I think it is good to hear from people you disagree with. Otherwise, you can become isolated, you can forget how to see other perspectives. Friendly arguments are a good skill to keep up.

**TN:** In Independence, the biggest source of concern now appears to be the budget. Previous administrations have been blamed by the current city manager, who instituted a "best practice" rule that places money into "buckets" – like the fund that collects utility bills for water usage won't be put to use elsewhere.

**Ellis:** The budget funds are complicated. And it is a good idea not to say, 'we have money over here in this fund and we are going to use it for that other thing.' But imposing tight restrictions, restrictions that mean you cannot touch one fund to assist another ... that can make it difficult. Determining how best to allocate money collected by the city is a wonderful tool to use, at times, and that can mean some inter-fund transferring.

**TN:** I should point out that the city manager calls it best practices, but I have contacted several professional management groups who have said it is more of a personal choice. There isn't any best-practice code that I can find...

**Ellis:** It's really a management prerogative. I think there are some questions you can always ask yourself as a city manager that help. Is this serving the citizens well? Do we have good facilities for the people here, to help them have a good quality of life? If you have that as your guide, it can really help focus spending.

**TN:** But when you were here, there wasn't this push for a large, regional water treatment plant. This will cost millions, and public works has been putting in a lot of infrastructure in other ways. It has taken a lot of money, in my understanding.

**Ellis:** Well, first, I always believe, when possible, to build or construct in a way that allows for expansion when the time comes. A water treatment plant has so many aspects – how will the water be treated, for example, because there are now a lot more choices. Ozone, ultraviolet light. Really great advances in technology. But I still believe in kind of a segmented approach. Build so there is the capability of expansion when needed, not necessarily go as large as possible initially.

**TN:** The city has a track record of borrowing, and the city debt was something I always reported on. It seems high, comparatively.

**Ellis:** One thing I like to emphasize is the kind of borrowing that is done. I'd go to the state, where the interest rates are so much lower on loans than just about any other place. Also, some of the loans, under certain circumstances, would be forgiven, at least partly. It always seemed to work well.

**TN:** Independence arranged for a \$7.5 million line of credit through Umpqua Bank, in part, for the design of the water treatment plant.

**Ellis:** I can only tell you that I always thought that the state had the best financing for cities. I cannot speak to the recent bank loan.

**TN:** I have reported on this and other financial issues facing the city, and it seems to have earned me pariah status with city administration. Several city staff, notably the communications director, won't speak with me due to what I was told is the city manager's ban on talking to the local press, which is me.

**Ellis:** The press is important. Did I always like what they had to say in Estacada, when I was there? No. But I can tell you that it was not something I held against the reporting. It comes with the job, when you have local press.

**TN:** I'd like to make the observation that it doesn't mean certain folk won't talk with a reporter. They just won't do it openly. So you may have benefited from establishing a trusting relationship with your local press. One recent example is the enormous backlash here on the removal of all funding for the 4th of July. It was discouraging how many contacted the local press about this ...

**Ellis:** That's tough. There is no easy solution, and I know this event is so important to people. I know that (Independence Days) has been run before by volunteers, but it would be really hard to do. One way might be to make different groups responsible for different parts, like the Rotary Club has taken on the parade for many years.

**TN:** Let's get back to how you succeeded in Independence for so many years, with such high regard still felt toward you and your time at the helm. You were seen as "very obliging" in the words of the late city councilor, Nancy Lodge.

**Ellis:** Well, I made some mistakes, for sure. But I always loved the job, really. There were always a lot of moving parts, so it was a constant challenge. I had to work with very different groups of people – city councils are all different. I also think I was always learning, and I enjoyed that. I really liked being of service on several levels. And I really liked this town. It's a great place and I still live here. ▪