

## Report card on the mayor

by Oscar Halpert, *Renton Reporter*

June 21, 2006

### **After 30 months in office, Kathy Keolker gets a thumbs-up from supporters, and Renton has made some big waves. But she gets some low marks from critics, especially in communication.**

She won election as mayor in 2003 following an energetic and often contentious campaign. When Kathy Keolker took office in January 2004, the 20-year City Council veteran became only the second female mayor in Renton's history.

Now, 2 1/2 years later and in the third year of her four-year term of office, Keolker, who earns \$115,992 annually, leads a city that is, to a large extent, reaping the rewards of its marketing efforts - in the form of publicity - while at the same time facing some big hurdles.

Certainly, Renton can boast some wins since Keolker took office:

- \* The Seattle Seahawks will move their training camp and administrative offices to Renton in 2008.
- \* A 46-acre mega-development called The Landing is expected to break ground later this year on land formerly owned by The Boeing Co. in north Renton.
- \* The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco has moved its Seattle offices to Renton.
- \* Long-standing code-enforcement issues are being addressed, and police have new tools to fight crime because Keolker initiated implementation of the REACT and RENSTAT programs in 2004.

In addition, positive regional media coverage only galvanized the city's marketing efforts. Reports in April that city officials met with Seattle SuperSonics officials about building an arena as part of The Landing's second phase kicked off a media stir.

At the same time, the mayor, who ran her campaign largely on a promise to be a good listener, has also been criticized in some quarters for not listening well enough. And several members of the City Council, which has final say on the mayor's proposals, say the relationship between the council and the mayor's office has never been more tense.

"There's been a change in the flavor of the council," said Toni Nelson, a longtime council member who chairs the council's Community Services Committee.

That change became most noticeable, Nelson said, early this year when discussion about the city's plans for urban renewal in an older section of the Highlands became increasingly adversarial.

"I think that's been hard on the council and hard on the mayor because none of us wants to be at odds with each other or a certain group of individuals. That's not what we like," she said.

Nelson said council members feel that change in the weekly meetings.

If Keolker's predecessor, two-term mayor Jesse Tanner, said he was going to do something, "it was pretty much a done deal," Nelson said. "Mayor Tanner did all of his research and everything before it was ever suggested to the council. If he wanted something, he was pretty much going to get it."

By contrast, she said, Keolker's approach "seems like there's always more wiggle room. For some reason, I just don't think Kathy Keolker has the full respect of the council. And I just don't know why."

Denis Law, who won his council seat in 2003, said he's been disappointed by the "lack of communication" between the mayor's office and the council.

"All too often, we do hear things from outside the walls of City Hall before hearing them from city staff," he said.

Council member Marcie Palmer said Keolker and council member Terri Briere "recruited me to run" for her first elected office in 2003, despite her own misgivings. She said her first six months in office were a learning experience in which she became "more realistic and wiser" about her relationship with Keolker.

"I wouldn't say I have a great relationship with her right now," Palmer said. "She seems to hang on to issues after it's time to move on."

Keolker agreed that communication has been an obstacle, especially since longtime staffer Julie Brewer, who handled most of the city's communications efforts, left her job in January. But the mayor said council members receive "far more" information from city staff members today than when she served on the council.

"I think the greatest challenge has been effectively communicating with the council and the public," she said. "We don't have a large staff and we haven't had a communications person since December.

"I want council members to know especially what's going on, so when they ask questions, they get answers. But we meet with them once a week, and that forum isn't necessarily the best way to do that. When there's seven (council members), you can't have individual meetings with them all the time."

Of course, communication can mean different things to different people.

Mary Burns-Haley, a resident of Leisure Estates and a member of the mayor's Senior Citizens Advisory Committee, said she's been impressed with Keolker's focus on cleaning up Renton. She said she's also impressed that Keolker has met several times with seniors who live in her neighborhood.

"I've been involved with the (committee) for 18 years," Burns-Haley said. "That's the first mayor that asked us our opinions of what needed to be done, what we'd like to see done to improve Renton. I thought it was pretty neat that she'd ask me my thoughts."

And John Giuliani Sr., the 78-year-old co-founder of John Julian & Son Electric Motors, said the mayor is "handling things" well.

"She's got a lot of brains, that girl," said Giuliani, one of the top contributors to Keolker's mayoral campaign.

Many council members interviewed for this story point to the controversy over the Highlands redevelopment as the marker for when the tension level between the council and mayor's office increased.

Keolker has proposed land-use changes for an area around Harrington Avenue Northeast and

Northeast Sunset Boulevard that has languished in an economic funk for years. She'd like to replace many of the older duplexes with townhomes and cottages and increase the availability of affordable housing. The long-term vision calls for creating a higher-density neighborhood with easy access to public transportation and green spaces. Once such housing is in place, the thinking goes, new retail businesses will be more interested in investing in the area.

Her proposal, however, has been fiercely opposed by neighborhood activists and others who allege the mayor is positioning the city to declare large swaths of the Highlands sub-area as blighted, a designation they say would eventually set the stage for condemnation of homes if owners are unwilling to sell. The city has countered that condemnation is an absolute last resort and highly unlikely.

Highlands Community Association leaders also have been critical of a year-long construction moratorium that the City Council agreed with some reservation last month to extend until the end of the year.

That controversy reached a crescendo when, after a now notorious April 17 public hearing on zoning in the affected area, someone wrote an expletive using Keolker's lipstick on the mirror in the mayor's personal bathroom at City Hall (see link ). A month-long investigation by the Kent Police Department was inconclusive, but the incident exacerbated the already tense relationship, council members say.

"We were doing quite well until the Highlands (issue) came along," said Randy Corman, 2006 council president. "Then I thought she was moving too fast on that, faster than she had the staff to properly follow through with all the commitments and forums. To me, it seemed the administration had simply bitten off more than it can chew."

Corman was one of three council members who were candidates for mayor in 2003, but he lost the primary election, then threw his support behind former council member King Parker's race against Keolker.

Corman, a 12-year council veteran, acknowledged that he and Keolker have had their differences over the years but says recent events, including a spat during the April 17 public hearing, have distanced him even further from her.

"Probably the most benign way I can understand what's going on right now is that she has spent so long in the legislative role - 20 years - that she's reluctant to let go of it," he said. "And she's trying to do both the job of the mayor and the council president at the same time."

Keolker said she and Corman usually meet weekly to discuss city issues, but haven't met in weeks.

"The door's still open and I would still like to have that opportunity," she said.

One message Keolker said hasn't reached the public the way she would have liked is about the issue of affordable housing in the city, generally, and in the Highlands, especially.

"I'm concerned that our seniors and service workers, in particular -- people on the low end of things -- just can't afford to buy homes," she said. "For instance, I've talked to many people who have kids and want a house to buy, but they can't afford anything."

Asked about the city's handling of the Highlands land-use controversy, Keolker said she hasn't had a chance to analyze the city's outreach efforts.

"The difficulty in the Highlands is it's not one ownership," she said. "We have to work with individuals, and that's difficult. There are some investors up there who just want to cash out and

make money, and there are seniors who just want to live there until they die."

Briere, who supported Keolker in her 2003 mayoral campaign, said Keolker has done a lot of work on behalf of the city, much of which the public never sees or hears about.

"One of the most important things about this mayor is her regional contacts and status regionally with various governmental boards. She's just so valuable," Briere said.

New city staff members have been hired, "key people that will really bring the city of Renton forward," she added.