

# Hawkins aide shifted to new post

*Chief of staff becomes deputy business administrator, room created for additional hire*

By Chris Sykes  
Staff Writer

Tahirah Cooper, chief of staff to Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr., recently switched jobs in the hierarchy by making a lateral move to the business administrator's office.

According to a July 12 memorandum from Hawkins to the City Council, the mayor decided to shift Cooper after he was told of a request for more personnel in the office. Three days earlier, John Mason, the city's business administrator, stated in a memo to Hawkins that due to layoffs and furloughs instituted by the administration to reduce expenses, Mason's office had become swamped with work that he asserted he could no longer handle by himself.

"The organization structure of our form of government requires the business administrator, among various other duties, to supervise and coordinate the administration of all departments and offices of the city government," Mason wrote. "In order to effectively carry out this large responsibility in a timely fashion, it is necessary for the business administrator to have adequate support staff to assist in fulfilling this duty.

"I am requesting the creation of a Deputy Director of Administration position so I can delegate the handling of some of the administrative responsibilities and projects in order to increase the efficiency of my office back to where I believe it should be," Mason continued.

Hawkins said he made the decision to move Cooper into the position in the best interests of the city. In the meantime, he said a search will begin for a new chief of staff.

"In tough economic times, we must work harder than ever to strategically manage the city and do more with less," said Hawkins. "As evidenced in the letter from Business Administrator John Mason, based on recent retirements and other events, there was an immediate need for a shift in personnel. I am very pleased that Tai Cooper has stepped up to take on these new responsibilities so we can continue to move the city forward."

Councilman Rayfield Morton said Hawkins was saying the correct words but not following through with corresponding actions. Morton said he believed it is easy to talk about "doing more with less" in "tough economic times," yet he said it had not stopped the administration from going on what he called "a mini-hiring spree." The shift of Cooper to Mason's office is not subject to the council's consent.

"It won't come in front of us because she's the deputy and we only do the directors' positions. Now they've got to fill her old position, which means we're talking about giving someone another \$70,000 job," said Morton. "At the same time, we're laying people off and asking them to take furloughs to cut costs. The bottom line: we could have done the same thing a lot cheaper."

Instead of moving Cooper, Morton said the administration could have reassigned city employees with lighter workloads to assist Mason. Ideally, Morton continued, that could have meant assigning two persons to do the one job. In that way, he said, it would not overburden or distract them from their existing duties while still assisting Mason.

"When we talk about doing more with less, then we could have asked some people to do more to help the BA instead of making more jobs at a cost to taxpayers," said Morton. "You can't keep hiring people, then turning around and telling people that you want to take 20 percent of their salary by furloughing them. In times of financial hardship, you have to change your way of living according to your new fiscal reality, but that does not seem to be happening right now."

Cooper, for her part, said that she is excited to continue working for the Hawkins administration and she is looking forward to this new opportunity. She had served as Hawkins' chief of staff since he entered office in 2008 after she worked as an aide to U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg.

"This transition is a tremendous opportunity to assist Mayor Hawkins and the city in furthering the objectives of the administration," Cooper said in a statement forwarded to the *Orange Transcript* by Mason. "I look forward to the new challenge with the city and embrace the new opportunity to continue improving services for our residents."