

Hawkins reviews activities during mayoral first year

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer, Orange Transcript

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. recently reflected on what he has accomplished during his first year in office.

"I think everything is for a reason," said Hawkins. "The mayor having the power and ability to appoint board members is something the state in its infinite wisdom created and enacted some time to facilitate the system of checks and balances in municipal government. That's what I was elected to do and I'm going to do it to the best of my ability."

Hawkins said his first year in office has had its ups and downs, but he would not trade his job as the city's mayor for anything.

After he was elected to replace acting Mayor Lisa Perkins and resigned Mayor Mims Hackett Jr., who pleaded guilty to federal corruption and state fraud charges, Hawkins said his first task was to reassure residents that the "old ways" in Orange had changed.

For Hawkins, that meant conducting community forums to give residents the chance to speak about Orange's issues. It meant the appointment of John Rappaport as police director and galvanizing the Orange Police Department in order to fight crime in the city.

Other moves Hawkins said he led were the replacement of city personnel, after review, who were determined by officials to not be performing their jobs. He said they were replaced with motivated, competent professionals.

"We're doing everything we can to take the city to the next level," said Hawkins. "My feeling is that the new business administrator is going to come in here and help facilitate a smooth transition to the next level. Our relationship with the City Council has improved since I first took office, and I'm optimistic that we'll keep traveling down this smooth pass."

John Mason was appointed as Orange's acting business administrator in May.

Hawkins acknowledged that he stumbled in handling his first city budget. He said he failed to anticipate the public outcry and backlash against him when he appointed himself to serve as fire director and gave himself the larger salary it paid in an unsuccessful bid to upgrade his status from a part-time to full-time mayor.

The first year also saw Hawkins getting into confrontations with council members on personnel issues, such as when he tried to replace retired Public Works Director Robert Corrado with his first choice, who did not meet with the council's approval. The position is being resolved as Arlene Kemp was appointed acting public-works director.

"I think a turbulent transition was natural because, coming in, I was something different and people weren't used to it because it represented change," said Hawkins. "If I had come in and everything went smoothly and perfect, then maybe, arguably, I would have just been doing what others before me had done. Now, when it comes to the City Council, I think we've turned the corner."

Even though he had to retract his leave of absence from the West Orange Police Department and return to a full-time position as a police officer, Hawkins said he has tried to keep everything in perspective. He said he never intended anything illegal or untoward by appointing himself fire director. His only reason for wanting to serve Orange as a full-time mayor, instead of sticking to the part-time position for which he ran for election, was because he thought it would help him be a better mayor for the residents.

"Every day is a new challenge, but I look forward to it because I'm always thinking about what I can do better for the people of Orange," said Hawkins. "I think my team of administrators, along with the City Council, are ready and we're going to work together to achieve our mutually common goal, a better Orange."