



Bayou la Batre Mayor Brett Dungan battles for his city

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February 6, 2014



Four months after he was elected to fill a vacant office, Bayou la Batre Mayor Brett Dungan is a whirlwind of public relations. Last week, he was in Montgomery for a seafood bash attended by the Governor and other state lawmakers. As he met the delegation, he discussed topics from a list of talking points he prepared beforehand.

Among other things, he was hoping to encourage legislators to address coastal homeowners insurance, study the feasibility of a “safe harbor” where commercial and recreational vessels could seek refuge in a storm, find a permanent funding source for the South Mobile County Tourism Authority and support oyster planting projects to improve harvests.

Dungan outlined those priorities just weeks after he hosted a town hall meeting with County Commissioner Jerry Carl, State Rep. David Sessions and State Sen. Bill Hightower. Attended by about 100 people, Dungan said it was an opportunity for constituents in South Mobile County to meet with their elected officials and talk about what was important going forward.

“The interesting thing to me was this was the first time that I know of that we had four levels of government on the same page,” he said. “And we’re all business people, we are not career politicians and we want to leverage our dollars appropriately so we decided to work closely and united. It’s exciting for me to see this dynamic where you have these people working together and having this synergy.”

Also in January, the mayor’s office coordinated what he called the city’s first Martin Luther King Day event. He said it was part of his commitment to bring “blacks and Asians and whites and minorities from all different ethnic and religious and cultural backgrounds to work together and take control of our community.”

Before last month, Dungan spent the majority of his workdays on the budget and meeting with department heads to see where to cut expenses. He said he ordered a 10 percent across-the-board budget cut and has achieved an “80 percent reduction of debt” by limiting overtime, leaving open positions unfilled, updating technology and evaluating the city’s insurance policies.

“There are a lot of issues, but we have three priorities,” he said. “Financial accountability, public safety and expanding recreational opportunities for both children and adults. That’s where our energy has been. As far as the finances, we’ve cut the monthly deficit where we are almost reconciling revenue and expenses for the first time in years. We upgraded the accounting software and re-trained bookkeepers

because the quality of information we have will affect the quality of the decisions we make working with department heads to get the information they need to more efficiently manage their departments.”

In doing so, Dungan said city employees discovered 25 vehicles no longer in use that were still being insured. At the municipal jail, the city has increased the “credit” inmates receive daily from \$15 to \$25, so they can pay their fines and be released from the city’s custody sooner. He is exploring lease options for new equipment rather than purchasing it outright.

“There is no single silver bullet but you have to have your eye on the ball all the time and go through the budget line item by line item,” he said.

Dungan said there has been about a “90 percent buy-in” throughout the city with his administration’s style, but after operating under previous mayor Stan Wright for the previous 11 years, he understands there may be some reluctance to change.

“The main obstacle is getting people to understand the opportunity we have,” he said. “The analogy I like to make is like Auburn turning its football program around with many of the same personnel but a completely different attitude. The previous administration basically liked to keep people at odds with each other as a ‘divide and conquer’ mentality and the biggest challenge is getting people to work together and trust one another.”

Dungan said the city’s housing and utilities boards, which operate independently of the city, have been particularly reluctant to share information. The previous mayor had a paid seat on the utilities board, but Dungan said other board members, who were appointed by Wright and in some cases campaigned against Dungan, have not extended the offer to him.

City Councilwoman Annette Johnson said it was “retaliatory politics.”

“I made a comment in the most recent council meeting why Sylvia Raley, the utilities board president who ran against Brett, is blocking him for position of superintendent,” Johnson said. “She said she wanted to wait for the Attorney General’s opinion, but the way I see it they lost the election and object to him doing the same thing Mayor Wright did and have a strong objection to his oversight.”

Since Dungan’s election, Johnson said the utilities board has acted on its own to manipulate board members’ terms and ensure that Wright’s appointees remain on the board longer. Two board members, Louis Hard and City Councilman George Ramirez, are defendants in a wrongful termination lawsuit brought by former Bayou la Batre police captain Darryl Wilson. The Housing Board also continues to mediate a lawsuit in which the city was included as a co-defendant.

Bill Wasden, the new city attorney, said the city was “improperly” named in the lawsuit against the Housing Board, based on the early relationship of the city to a grant application for the construction of the 100-unit housing development, prior to the formal establishment of the Housing Authority.

“We’re in the process of working toward a resolution as we advance toward trial setting,” Wasden said. He called the lawsuits “unnecessary distractions to day-to-day governing that we want to resolve to focus on more important things.”

Wasden, who also represents the Mobile County Communications District, is a partner in the same law firm as new Mobile City Attorney Ricardo Woods. He replaced Jay Ross, who continues to represent the Utilities Board.

Meanwhile, Dungan said the lawsuits were an afterthought and he’s more focused on governing and getting people involved with his administration.

“What I’m detecting is a lot of people in South Alabama are frustrated with national politics and they feel powerless to do anything. I think what we’re seeing in Bayou la Batre and in Mobile is that new administrations have come in and people are really excited about getting involved in their local communities where they can actually have an influence,” he said. “For me, there is almost a spiritual component to being mayor, it’s almost pastoral. We have 671 houses in our community and part of what we’re trying to accomplish is really to help empower people to realize they can take responsibility for their lives and their community.”