

# Hobbs commissioners reject severance agreement with city manager

By Heath Haussamen, NMPolitics.net | October 4, 2016

*Screenshot taken from meeting webcast*

*After commissioners voted down an amendment to his contract on Monday, Hobbs City Manager J.J. Murphy said he was “still your city manager tomorrow, and I’m proud to do that.”*

Saying Hobbs could no longer afford City Manager J.J. Murphy’s salary — almost \$177,000 plus benefits this year — Mayor Sam Cobb announced in a weekend newspaper column a plan to transition Murphy out of the job and hire a new city manager.

“With the current local economic difficulties, it has been challenging to defend an extension in the same salary range as he currently receives,” Cobb wrote in **the column**

(<http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/ODN/HobbsNews/shared/ShowArticle.aspx?doc=NHN%2F2016%2F10%2F02&entity=Aro0400&sk=86DD877D>), which was published by the Hobbs News-Sun. “...Thus, we

have spent considerable time discussing a transition plan which would benefit all stakeholders, including the residents of Hobbs.”

Cobb apparently didn’t have the consensus he thought he did for the severance agreement. Commissioners voted down **the proposal** (<http://nmpolitics.net/index/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/10.3.16.MurphyAgreement.pdf>) Monday evening **during an emotional meeting** (<http://livestream.com/accounts/2058816/events/6447006/videos/137797252>) that revealed a divide between those who want Murphy to stay and those who don’t.

The lack of agreement leaves Murphy’s future with the city up in the air for now. His **current contract** (<http://www.nmpolitics.net/index/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/MurphyThirdContractAmendment.pdf>) ends in August 2017. He has been applying for other jobs **in Las Cruces** (<http://nmpolitics.net/index/2016/10/search-firm-told-hobbs-manager-he-was-a-finalist-for-las-cruces-job/>) and elsewhere.

Murphy is currently a finalist for the city manager job in Port St. Lucie, Fla., and is scheduled to be there for a public meet-and-greet **on Friday** (<http://www.tcpalm.com/story/news/local/shaping-our-future/property-values/2016/09/29/social-mixer-port-st-lucie-city-manager-finalists-next-week/91284572/>).

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The proposed severance agreement would have allowed Murphy to continue as Hobbs’ city manager until June 1, 2017, unless he got another job sooner. And from the day he left the Hobbs job, he would have worked as a special consultant to the city to aid in the transition to a new manager for up to another year. As a consultant, Murphy would have received a payout equal to one year of his salary in addition to insurance and a car allowance.

The vote was 3-4 against approving the agreement. Some who voted against it explained that they don’t want Murphy to leave; others were less clear about their reasons. But after the meeting Cobb was quoted by the News-Sun as saying, “some want him to stay and some do not want him to stay.”

During the meeting, City Commissioner Joseph Calderon, who voted for the agreement, was visibly upset when it failed. He bemoaned “people from the outside griping and complaining” about Murphy, and said he wants Murphy to stay in Hobbs but doesn’t think it will happen.

“This is unbelievable,” Calderon told the other commissioners. “... I’m disappointed in some of you — very, very disappointed.”

Murphy has been under intense scrutiny over the past year as a group of citizens pushed the Commission to begin **webcasting its meetings** (<http://nmpolitics.net/index/2016/06/hobbs-city-commission-oks-webcasting-of-its-meetings/>) — which it **recently started doing** (<http://www.hobbsnm.org/videos.html>) . Some have complained about Murphy’s **generous**

(<http://nmpolitics.net/index/2015/07/hobbs-managers-contract-evolution-exposes-sense-of-entitlement/>) **compensation** (<http://nmpolitics.net/index/2015/12/hobbs-manager-cashes-in-paid-time-off-to-ring-in-the-new-year/>) and suggested it was time for him **to leave** (<http://nmpolitics.net/index/2016/04/hobbs-should-terminate-city-managers-contract-pay-severance/>) . And the state auditor is currently investigating allegations of “**less-than-arms-length**” **city contracts** (<http://nmpolitics.net/index/2016/09/resident-alleges-less-than-arms-length-city-contracts-in-hobbs/>) in Hobbs. Murphy says he and the city have done nothing wrong.

Two commissioners’ responses to Calderon appeared to indicate they’re unhappy with Murphy.

“I have my own feelings also,” Commissioner Marshall Newman, who voted against the agreement, said. “I have to go with my constituents and what’s happened with the city employees. So I’ll stand by my city employees any chance I have.”

Commissioner Garry Buie said he voted against the agreement because “it should have been shortened.” He said his vote “has all to do with people that I talk to on a daily basis, and what I have seen, and what has occurred within the city of Hobbs, New Mexico. This is not outside influence on my part.”

The other two who voted against the severance agreement said they don’t want to lose Murphy, who was recently voted the state’s **city manager of the year** (<http://digital.olivesoftware.com/olive/apa/hobbsnews/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=NHN%2F2016%2F09%2F02&id=Ar00114&sk=D2A03513>) by the New Mexico Municipal League. “I want J.J. to stay,” Commissioner Jonathan Sena said. “I don’t know if that’s possible. I don’t know if that’s going to happen.”

Commissioner Patricia Taylor said Murphy “has been good to this community.”

“Very few people think so, because they have their issues and their things they want to dig up, but he’s been good to this community,” she said.

Commissioner Don Gerth, who joined Cobb and Calderon in voting for the agreement, said Murphy has “put up with a lot from... different individuals.”

“We need to end this now, and let him move on,” Gerth said. “I just feel like he’s a casualty of this downturn, and he needs to move on with this life.”

After commissioners voted down the agreement, Murphy thanked city employees.

“Your efforts are valued and appreciated,” he said. “No matter how this vote went tonight, the good news is I’m still your city manager tomorrow, and I’m proud to do that.”

Cobb sought to reassure residents after the public disagreement that the city would “continue to take care of the people’s business.”

“We’re not falling apart,” the mayor said. “Life is going to move on and we’re going to come up with a way to find a resolution and some common ground.”

