

CAO extension unanimous

Supervisors address transparency concerns over closed sessions

By Josh Cozine The Trinity Journal, March 11, 2026

County supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday, March 3, to approve a previously announced and expected two-year contract extension for County Administrative Officer Trent Tuthill. The expected extension was announced in a press release last month following a closed session meeting, but needed to be ratified during open session (“Trinity CAO recruitment comes full circle,” Feb. 25).

Supervisors were said to have received more than 50 applications for the CAO position and offered interviews to five potential candidates, but ultimately announced an extension of the current contract with amendment made to increase the CAO’s vacation time and a clause for \$20,000 in succession planning.

The process was initiated in November with the announcement Tuthill was not going to continue his contract when it was expected to expire come April. It was almost immediately mired in questions from the public about why a new CAO was being sought, what the process was in hiring someone new and why the process was being carried out in closed session for such an important position in the county (“CAO stepping down at end of contract,” Nov. 19 and “CAO recruitment decided behind closed doors,” Dec. 24).

Throughout the process supervisors noted the transparency concerns, but said there were also privacy considerations to be balanced for anyone applying for the position. Now that the contract was in open session, supervisors expounded further on the process, but not before a final round of public comment requesting more information.

Transparency and trust

Dan Trujillo has been following the CAO recruitment process, making comments to the supervisors, even sending in his own guest column to The Trinity Journal on the importance of the CAO position and the importance of transparency and the democratic process in filling it (“Who cares about the CAO, closed sessions anyway?” Feb. 4).

He said that the public was never made aware of any of the criteria or metrics used by supervisors in considering other applicants for the CAO position. “The public has not heard the criteria used, the public has not heard competing visions debated,” Trujillo said. “The public has not heard an open explanation of why this contract extension through 2028 is in the county's best interest.”

Vidette Vanderwide has similarly attended recent supervisor meetings, commenting and criticizing the CAO closed session recruitment process. She said the flip-flop between the contract not being renewed but now being extended presents bad optics to the public despite recent upbeat press releases by the county.

“When those signals conflict without clear public explanation, whatever threat of confidence remains begins to erode and is gone quickly,” she said. “Our county is navigating staffing shortages, financial strains and growing concern about administrative direction no matter how many pretty press releases you put out,” she said.

Scott White took issue with the \$20,000 included for succession planning included in the contract amendments and the only statement on the funds mentioned in the staff report. “The County is committed to continuing the financial stability and focus on public service that has been fostered by Mr. Tuthill, and has determined it is in the best interest of the County to take the time to identify and train a successor to continue this mission,” the staff report states. “Who determined this is in our best interest to train

somebody in-house as a successor?” White asked. The board? The CAO? Human Resources? I don’t know, the staff report doesn’t tell us.”

“It looks like the board is going to hand select the next CAO without a search for the best candidate or further opportunity for public involvement,” White said. “Hand selection of successors is not a democratic process.”

Other commenters re-emphasized a greater want for transparency when considering such high-level positions and about how supervisors evaluated the more 50 applications received before deciding on none of them.

Transparency and privacy

Supervisors were quick to make a motion to approve extending the CAO contract to Tuthill by two more years, with very little open session deliberation among themselves. Most spoke at length, however, on balancing a want for public transparency with privacy concerns for potential applicants. as well as an appreciation for Tuthill agreeing to stay and the work they have seen him do in the past three years.

Sup. Ric Leutwyler said releasing names of people who applied for the CAO position would raise multiple privacy concerns and would have likely led to less applicants overall as they might not want it heard by their current employers they were looking at other jobs. Holding open public interviews, as is done for replacing elected positions, would likely have done the same, he said.

Sup Liam Gogan, who noted he has been a supervisor since before Tuthill was hired, said previously the county didn’t have a plan for “pretty much anything,” and despite the extensive recruitment process, no one matched Tuthill. “We honestly didn’t get anybody that was nowhere near qualified to do this job,” Gogan said.

“There was nobody that could fill the shoes of CAO Tuthill in that group, and I guarantee you this board is right about what we’re doing.” Sup. Jill Cox is the only

other supervisor who was around before Tuthill, and she agreed. “Two of us on this board have seen a different day, and we have seen this day.” Cox said. “In this decision, we are saying we prefer this day.” She said other counties also struggle to find and keep CAOs as qualified as Tuthill. “Typically the turnover is quick and the results are not good,” she said.

Sup. Heidi Carpenter-Harris provided some detail of the process involved without mentioning any names. First, she said many applicants did not have the appropriate experience necessary to be Trinity County’s CAO. Any of the applicants that did were sent written questions developed by the supervisors to respond to before any closed session interviews were scheduled.

Other than being overseen by county supervisors, the interview process described by Carpenter-Harris sounded typical. First the persons being interviewed talked about why they wanted the job before supervisors asked two rounds of questions each, and final time was given for the applicants to ask any questions they had for supervisors or county administration. Finally, Carpenter-Harris clarified the \$20,000 for succession planning is not only for the position of CAO, but for all departments within the county government.