

## NORTH PORT

# Written reviews absent for top city workers

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Published: Sunday, May 15, 2016 at 11:34 a.m.

Nine of North Port's top government employees will earn salaries totaling close to \$1 million this year, each making far above the city's median household income of \$50,855.

But, if the public wants to see how these city executives are performing, they will not find recent written reviews at City Hall.

North Port's assistant city manager, police chief, fire chief, economic development coordinator and five of its department directors have not received written performance evaluations in years.

While many other local governments require yearly evaluations of most or all non-union employees to be recorded in writing, North Port, the area's largest and fastest growing municipality, has no city-wide policy requiring performance evaluations.

Even when city departments have come under scrutiny, their leaders were not evaluated.

Over the past two years, for example, the North Port Police Department faced a series of challenges including two officers being charged with sexual battery and the subsequent suicide of one of those officers. The Center for Public Safety Management was paid about \$60,000 to do a third-party assessment of the entire department. But Police Chief Kevin Vespia remained without a written appraisal of his job performance.

Governments and private businesses use written performance evaluations in various ways, including to assign pay increases, promote and demote employees and set goals for individual workers.

In lieu of written evaluations, City Manager Jonathan Lewis said he meets with North Port's department directors every month to talk about what they and their departments have done well and what could be done better.

But that leaves no public record available to North Port's city commissioners or the citizens who pay city employees' salaries.

Lewis, city manager since May 2011, said his preference for verbal reviews is effective.

"The intent is not to hide anything. The intent is to get to the goal, which is improving services to the community," he said. "I think the most effective way to do that is to talk to people."

Others see it differently.



North Port City Manager Jonathan R. Lewis  
STAFF PHOTO / NICK ADAMS

Vice Mayor Rhonda DiFranco said she is troubled that top city employees have not received written reviews.

“How do you know if your upper echelon is doing their jobs appropriately?” she asked. “Because there's no documentation, and if it's not documented it didn't happen.”

Barbara Petersen, president of the state's First Amendment Foundation, which supports access to public records, said North Port is missing "accountability."

“I'm kind of dumbfounded by it, that a governmental agency would not have written evaluations of its employees, particularly those making the most money,” she said. “It's all about oversight and accountability. It's not a private matter between the city manager and an upper echelon employee. It's a performance evaluation of a public servant.”

North Port's five city commissioners conduct annual written evaluations of the city manager and city attorney, both charter officers each making more than \$150,000 a year. The evaluations are required in the manager's and attorney's contracts.

The city manager received high marks on his most recent annual evaluation from city commissioners. Lewis averaged a score of 4.37 out of 5 points, with his lowest score, 3.5, coming from Commissioner Linda Yates.

North Port's other two charter officers, the city clerk and deputy city clerk, who are paid a total of more than \$200,000 annually, do not have contracts. They have not received annual written evaluations from city commissioners since 2010.

Determining how long the rest of North Port's 264 non-union employees, 48 percent of the city's workforce of 553, have gone without a written performance evaluation requires digging. The city does not keep a physical or electronic database or list for quick reference.

And while North Port's personnel policy manual specifically states "the city has established a program for evaluating the work performance of employees" — written annual evaluations — newly hired human resources director Christine McDade said it's unclear if employees are required to participate in that program.

“Nowhere can I find in the policy where it addresses if supervisors are required to perform these evaluations,” she wrote in an email. “Some have chosen to do so.”

At the Herald-Tribune's request, North Port provided the dates of the last written reviews for employees in the city's Neighborhood Development Services department.

Of the 49 employees, 23 had not received an annual written review since 2014 or longer. That included four managers and the department's director. Another manager from the department, on the city's payroll since 2014, had no annual written review on file.

### **No raises, no reviews**

One reason that written performance evaluations have not been necessary in recent years, Lewis said, is that raises for non-union city employees have not been tied to job performance since 2011. A majority of city commissioners voted for 3 percent raises across the board in 2014 and 2015 despite that North Port's personnel policy manual states "pay increases are to be earned and based upon job performance."

Performance based raises may have not been given to city employees for years but that doesn't mean written performance evaluations are not needed, Commissioner Yates wrote in her most recent annual performance evaluation of the city manager.

“Whether or not the city is in a fiscal capacity to afford raises is irrelevant to having performance measures of individual professional growth, ethics, efficiency, successes, goals and expectations,” she wrote.

North Port is implementing changes to its performance evaluation program, Lewis said.

In October, the city budgeted \$631,040 to establish a standalone human resources department with seven full-time employees. Previously human resources was a division within the city's general services department.

McDade, a former human resources director for Fort Myers, was hired in January to head the new department. She said North Port's personnel policy manual, which was written in 2008 and most recently revised in 2013, is undergoing review.

North Port is buying software that will automate and streamline its employee evaluation process and record written evaluations for employees, including department directors, McDade said. A Citizen Services Survey, which Lewis said will allow residents to rate services provided by city workers, is expected to be completed by June.

“We will use that as a benchmark,” Lewis said. “That's real data points for us to use.”

But there's no way to get back years of employee evaluations that were not written, the First Amendment Foundation's Petersen said.

“We're going to take it on face (value) that everybody has been doing their job for the last five years,” she said. “If they don't put it in writing, there's no record, therefore we can't hold them accountable.”

### **Other local governments**

The policies of Sarasota County and Venice state that government employees annually receive written performance evaluations from their immediate supervisors. This includes department directors.

Venice City Manager Ed Lavallee said the written annual evaluations complement more frequent conversations he has with department directors. He said written documents are vital to tracking and encouraging employee development.

“It's just a way of assembling accurately the factual stuff over a long period of time,” he said. “This is a tool to help them identify their strengths and weaknesses.”

In the city of Sarasota, the employee performance evaluation policy appears to be similar to North Port's practice with department directors.

Most of Sarasota's non-union employees receive annual written performance evaluation reports that become a permanent part of their service record. But the city's policy also states department heads and “other key staff members” are evaluated at the discretion of their appointing officer.

City records show Sarasota's Neighborhood and Development Services director Tim Litchet last received an annual performance evaluation in 2006. Police Chief Bernadette DiPino received an annual review in 2014 that consisted of a single page of notes.

Tom Barwin, Sarasota's city manager since September 2012, said written performance evaluations can negatively affect employees' performance and morale. Like Lewis, Barwin said he gives verbal feedback regularly to his department directors.

“Performance appraisals, if not done very well and (not) approached in a constructive and healthy way, can do more harm than good,” he said. “Our system now, it's numerical rating scores and boxes that can be checked and translated to scores. I don't like that. I think it can really misrepresent an individual's performance.”

Barwin added that the city of Sarasota is exploring ways to update its performance evaluation system.

All city of Bradenton employees, including department directors, receive annual written performance evaluations. Employees in leadership positions, such as directors, are evaluated but with a different form than the rank-and-file.

While Palmetto's personnel policy manual does not state city employees must receive annual written evaluations, City Clerk Jim Freeman said the city has web-based performance evaluation software that supervisors are encouraged and reminded to use.

“It is something we do and monitor,” he said.

However, Freeman added, Palmetto's current mayor has moved toward giving the city's four department directors verbal evaluations instead of written ones.

Freeman's last annual written review from Mayor Shirley Groover Bryant, the city's chief executive officer, occurred in 2013.

In North Port, department directors are evaluated on a daily, weekly and monthly basis, Lewis said. Each department provides weekly highlights that in turn go into monthly directors reports, both of which are published on the city's website.

However, neither the weekly nor monthly reports provide an assessment of any department director's individual performance. Instead they record updates on the departments' activities and accomplishments as a whole.

If a city employee's performance falls below expectations, the employee is put on a documented Performance Improvement Plan, Lewis said. Those reports are public records.

Lewis, who has a master's degree in public administration from the University of South Florida and has worked in government administration since 1999, said the way governments evaluate employee performance is evolving.

He also pointed out that some mega corporations have recently left the institutionalized practice of annual performance reviews by the wayside.

In 2015 General Electric replaced its formal annual reviews with more frequent, informal discussions and app-based feedback about employees' short-term goals. Software giant Adobe got rid of them in 2012 and started conducting informal, more frequent conversations with employees about company expectations.

Lewis said his method of evaluations is similar.

“We're running a corporation here. It's a municipal corporation,” he said. “What I find to be more effective is constant feedback.”

Stewart Liff, founder of government performance management consultant firm Stewart Liff & Associates, said transparency is important in the public sector because “you're serving the public, and you're having a huge impact on the lives of people.”

Liff said that giving frequent verbal feedback to employees is a good practice, but he underlined the importance of having written records.

Not having a consistent and transparent evaluation system up and down the chain of command could lead to resentment from employees or accusations of cronyism, he said.

Liff recommended North Port incorporate written, monthly report cards that document and compare employees' performance using data. He used such a system to evaluate 400 employees when he was director of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office in Los Angeles.

“Having everything in writing ensures the system is operating as intended,” he said. “Making it visual, transparent, honest and open, it makes it less about who you know and more about what you do.”

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