

## COMMENTARY

## ■ IT WORKED FOR ME

“But why?” everyone asked. On both coasts, and in different accents, I was asked time and again why I would leave a 20-year tenure with the city of Beverly Hills, California (most of the time there as city manager), to take the same job in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Most of the easy explanations did *not* apply:

- I was not in trouble with the Beverly Hills city council. In fact, the city council was an extraordinary and supportive group of people who believe in the council-manager system.
- There was no more than normal fear of any upcoming election.
- I do not have family roots in the East. I had lived all but three years of my life in California.
- I was not going to make more money; in fact, quite the contrary.
- I had no outstanding credit card debt from overspending on Rodeo Drive.
- The Los Angeles County sheriff was *not* hot on my trail!

More than once I heard: *Beverly Hillbillies* in reverse!”

So why leave a thriving community with a famous zip code, load up the truck, and move away from Bev-er-ly... Hills?

Even ICMA heard about me and telephoned: “We hope you’ll write about your experience because maybe there are lessons from your job change that will apply to others in the profession.”

I responded, “Ya think?”

**WHY MOVE?**

All this happened almost three years ago. I moved in November 2003. Only now can I explain it adequately.

I suspect that in city managers’ lives there may be one or two times when the planets align and make it possible to make a move on our own terms. There are always reasons not to move—good job, kids, schools, family, money, friends, and a spouse’s career. In 2003, Venus and Mars got it right.

This story is largely about my relationship with my wife of 32 years, who is also my best friend. I would not have moved without her support. In 2003, our younger child left for college, leaving us empty nesters. At the same time, Carol, who is a talented manager of nonprofit organizations, completed her work with the new Kidspace Children’s Museum in Pasadena, California, a job that had been an eight-year passion. With that project complete, she found it in her heart to support me in pursuit of my career expectations.

And still, it was hard to move. I loved Beverly Hills. I served that community for 20 years, 14 as city manager. I was hooked. It’s a real community—not just glitz and glamour. I did not love the two-and-a-half hours of commuting, usually six days each week, because I lived in more-affordable Glendale; but I loved the job. Being rid of the drive was one benefit from the move but not the cause.

I valued my job in Beverly Hills because I loved the staff and the residents. I miss them, but I know that the community is doing just fine. Its new manager Roderick Wood is more than an able successor. Perhaps lesson number one for me is how much I have learned by watching how the current manager has moved the city team forward in ways I had never imagined. A person

can learn a great deal by watching one’s successor and keeping an open mind.

Today, I can see clearly that I left Beverly Hills for two good reasons:

1. It was the right time in my life for this particular professional challenge.
2. I fell for Spartanburg as a place to live. To paraphrase Renée Zellweger’s confession to Tom Cruise in *Jerry Maguire*: “Spartanburg had me at hello.” At first I was infatuated, but now it is love.

I recognize that I may be overusing the verb “love” in this story, but remember that I spent 20 years in Hollywood. I am not, however, just blowing air kisses. I have been blessed to work in two communities I truly adore (is that better?). Furthermore, when I left Beverly Hills at age 54, my wife was glad that my midlife crisis focused on infatuation with job and community rather than sports cars or skydiving. (She tried to interest me in extreme gardening, but that didn’t take.)

**SPARTANBURG, SOUTH CAROLINA**

Spartanburg is a 20-square-mile community of 39,000 people. Were it not for the nation’s most unfavorable annexation laws, we would be a city of well over 100,000. Beverly Hills is often referred to as “the hole in the doughnut,” surrounded as it is by Los Angeles. Spartanburg is the whole doughnut.

People in this area identify with Spartanburg and call it home, whether they live in the city (and pay property taxes) or not. Spartanburg supports the civic infrastructure for the region—it has the seats of government, the hospitals, six colleges, social services, nonprofit organizations, large churches, parks, and the arts. Residents have no identity crisis. We are Spartanburg and proud of it.

We have beautiful historic neighborhoods. We also have, however, a considerable number of old public housing projects and the associated poverty. Because this is a caring community, we are working on this problem despite an inadequate tax base. (Is there a city manager who will profess to have an adequate tax base?)

South Carolina is often characterized

as having three regions: the Lowlands (Charleston, Hilton Head, Myrtle Beach), the Midlands (Columbia), and the Upstate (Spartanburg, Greenville, Anderson). The Upstate was extremely reliant on the old textile mill economy, and as the textile industry moved to China and Mexico, the Upstate fell into economic decline. About 30 years ago, the Upstate enjoyed a resurgence of sorts through attraction of European corporations, especially those in the textile and automotive industries.

BMW located its U.S. plant between Spartanburg and Greenville. Other suppliers, such as Michelin, soon followed. In the years since, this region has actively retooled and retrained its workforce to obtain benefit from this movement. Although we still need far more investment, the Upstate continues to do its best to take advantage of its favorable location, weather, labor force, friendly people, and cost of living. We have huge challenges, but we see hope for a positive future. Our population counts on it.

Location is a real plus. Spartanburg is called Hub City because it's at the crossroads of north-south and east-west Interstate highways and rail lines. We are one hour from Charlotte and Asheville, two and a half hours from Atlanta, and three and a half hours from Charleston. The gorgeous Blue Ridge Mountains and the Cherokee Foothills Scenic Highway are only minutes to our west. When South Carolinians coined the slogan, "Beautiful Places, Smiling Faces," they must have been thinking of Spartanburg.

Residents' smiling faces reflect a diverse city population that is 53 percent African American and 46 percent Caucasian. Small Latino and Asian populations are starting to grow. The seven-member city council is composed of three black and three white members. The current mayor is white; the previous mayor was black. We work at getting along, and we take pride in that.

I am blessed to work with a talented mayor and city councilmembers who support the role of the city manager.

### **ALL GOOD THINGS**

I liked Spartanburg so much that I actually applied for the job twice. I first visited Spartanburg in June 2002, as a

last-minute applicant for the city manager vacancy that existed at that time. It was my first time in South Carolina. It was also my first serious job search in years. What I found in Spartanburg surprised me—great beauty mixed with noticeable poverty.

I also found warm, welcoming people. Hopeful people. Many of the local people had needs, but they also had a belief that times were changing and that the future could hold something special. I also found big differences between Beverly Hills and Spartanburg (see box on this page).

Some of the differences appealed to me. I learned that development is valued by almost everyone in Spartanburg. Government processes were extremely efficient. Twice-monthly council meetings usually took 90 minutes. Public hearings were courteous, with no gadflies that I could see. I saw desirable neighborhoods well within our housing price range (and this is an understatement) that were within five minutes of work.

But I didn't take the job that time. I was a late applicant, and my wife and I simply did not have enough time to work through such a major life change. I had to drop out of that recruitment, but, as luck would have it, the job became vacant again a year later.

I was aware of the vacancy in advance the next time because I had been following the city on the Internet. There I was, working in Beverly Hills, surrounded by all that glitters, but I knew I was hooked on Spartanburg. Spartanburg's visionary mayor, William Barnet III, called me, and I was ready to apply.

I participated in the recruitment process in Spartanburg and was named manager in the fall of 2003. People predicted to me that I would enjoy a slower pace. I haven't noticed. My new job challenges motivate me to work hard—harder perhaps than at any time in my career.

On the other hand, the five-minute commute, compared with the one-way hour-and-a-quarter commute in Beverly Hills, allows me much more quality time both at work and at home. With an excellent staff and a motivated community, we are making progress here in Spartanburg. I am only a small part of

	<b>Beverly Hills</b>	<b>Spartanburg</b>
Population	35,000 nighttime; 150,000+ daytime	39,000 nighttime; 125,000+ daytime
Area	5.7 square miles	20.0 square miles
Form of government	Council-manager	Council-manager
Mayor	Rotated by tradition	Elected
City council	Five, at-large	Six, by district, plus mayor
Meetings	6–8 hours, twice monthly	1.5 hours, twice monthly
Council subcommittees	Approximately 30	1 or 2, as needed
Budget	Approximately \$250 million	Approximately \$37 million
Staff size	1,100	500
State color	Blue	Red
Labor force	Collective bargaining (largely unionized)	Right to work (no union representation)
Attitude toward development	"Not in my backyard" (NIMBY) and "Build absolutely nothing, anywhere, near anyone" (BANANA)	Very welcoming
Weather	One season, enjoyed year around	Three great seasons, plus summer
Shopping	Barneys, Neiman Marcus, Rodeo Drive, Saks Fifth Avenue	Historic Morgan Square, two Wal-Mart stores, WestGate Mall
Corporate headquarters	Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, four talent agencies, Hilton Hotels, Playboy West	Advance America, Denny's, Extended Stay Hotels, Gibbs International, Milliken & Company, QS/1
Colleges	None	Converse College, Sherman College, Spartanburg Methodist College, Spartanburg Technical College, University of South Carolina Upstate, Wofford College
Most memorable breakfast	Brad and Jennifer at Danny DeVito's	Grits with cheese and stuffed waffles
Religious institutions	8	200+
City manager's salary	You don't want to know.	I don't want you to know.

- If you want to make a move as dramatic as mine, check your ego at the door. I found out I had a lot left to learn in the city management business. I also found out I was not nearly as hard to replace as I might have fantasized. In many ways, I have successfully moved myself outside the "comfort zone."
- The new city manager is well-advised to learn the local cultural differences as soon as possible. For instance, it is much more important to be "on time" in South Carolina than it is in Los Angeles. (In LA, one can always blame lateness on the traffic.) In Los Angeles, it is much more acceptable to be blunt and direct with people than it is in the South. (The graciousness of the South is genuine and is expected.) Grits are good. (Grits is good?)
- Ours is a noble calling, i.e., serving a community. We are blessed to have this opportunity and to earn a nice living doing it. We only get one career, so we might as well go for it. I was a hero to my kids (for a week maybe) after I had breakfast once with the now-infamous Brad and Jennifer. Today, however, I am a hero in my bathroom mirror when that reflection says, "Yeah, this is what y'all are supposed to be doing with your career."

I recommend this kind of repotting, but only if your family can take it. (I learned some useful words during my short foray into extreme gardening!) Finding new doctors, dry cleaners, and plumbers is not easy. Learning new laws, traditions, and styles can be frustrating. Being the one with the accent is startling but fun. But, at this time in our lives, this move made sense, and I am proud we had the courage to make it.

As professionals, city managers have the joy of working within a community and, if we are lucky, we get to live there and enjoy the fruits of our labors. I hope to enjoy Spartanburg for many years. As Uncle Jed on the *Beverly Hillbillies* would say, "Ya'll come see us, hear?"

—Mark Scott  
City Manager  
Spartanburg, South Carolina

it at this point, but I realize that doesn't matter. It's great to be on the team. This is the professional challenge I wanted at this stage in my career.

### IS A MOVE RIGHT FOR EVERYONE?

I'm not sure if my experience offers insights to other long-time managers. If

I were to generalize, I would offer the following:

- Sometimes the grass is greener on the other side of the hill, but you will want to know your hills.
- It is much more fun to be the one proposing new ideas, than to be the one saying, "We already tried that."