



Largo earns its spot in history

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When the public meetings are finished and the reporters quit calling and the locals go back to worrying about traffic and taxes, how will history remember Largo?

By now, everyone from the New York Times to NPR knows the city manager of this town of 76,000 is being ousted in a spasm of righteousness.

Five of seven commissioners voted this week to fire Steve Stanton, a well-regarded longtime employee, for a personal matter that has little do with his job performance.

News got out that Stanton was ultimately planning to undergo a sex change.

From he to she: Is Largo ready? a St. Petersburg Times headline asked after the story broke, with the answer from many being a very loud no.

Stanton has his supporters, right down to the rock-steady mayor, but that wasn't enough to save his job.

People came by the hundreds to that hastily called meeting, some to say how badly he reflected on their so-called City of Progress, or even how Jesus wouldn't like this one bit.

"It's the fact that he deceived people. He wasn't honest with us," one man said, as if everybody would have given him supportive hugs if only he had said something sooner.

"I do not feel that he has the integrity, nor the trust, nor the respect, nor the competence to continue as the city manager for the city of Largo," said Commissioner Mary Gray Black

Not to discount the fact that Stanton's planned change is a shocker, something utterly unfamiliar to many. Forgive a clumsy analogy, but imagine your boss one day says to you: Listen. Soon, I'm going to be coming to work every day in a chicken suit. I'll still be the same old boss you knew, except for the chicken suit. It might take some getting used to. (Obviously this hypothetical fails to take into account the deeply personal nature of Stanton's situation, or all the people who struggle similarly with very real gender issues.)

What might have worked? Waiting to see if Stanton turned out to be the same city manager as before - just, well, different.

Maybe to you it would seem a far stretch, an insult even, to compare what's happening here to the slow and painful battles for civil rights, women's rights, gay rights. But they all were about people who wanted to be treated fairly in spite of something about themselves other people didn't seem to like, something they themselves couldn't change if they wanted to.

Decades from now, we will have seen many more like Stanton, the issues here fodder for the courts and the law. One day maybe we'll look at each other and wonder why anyone cared so much about this man's personal life, enough to take away his job.

There's a famous school desegregation photo from the 1950s. A black teenage girl carries schoolbooks outside a high school. Behind her, a white girl screams at her, her mouth twisted in rage.

Interesting thing about that photo: years later, that woman apologized to the person she and others once condemned.

Those commissioners - the ones who could not see past doing what was popular in favor doing what was right - probably won't go down in history as the Largo Five, or anything so notorious-sounding.

But history has a way of putting things like prejudice and ignorance in perspective, perspective being something we could have used around here lately.