

Peterson has right mix of skills as leader

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Salem is blessed with two good candidates willing to serve as the city's next mayor, Anna Peterson and Chuck Bennett.

They both have strong backgrounds. But for what Salem needs in these times, Peterson is the better choice at the May 18 election. She is skilled at building relationships among diverse groups, bringing people together and being a catalyst.

That election technically is a primary for the mayor's race. Assuming that one candidate wins a majority of votes, he or she will be the only mayoral candidate listed on the November general election ballot.

No matter who that person is, both candidates are to be congratulated for running clean, positive campaigns. So far, they have set an example worth emulating by other candidates.

Salem has prospered under the four terms of outgoing Mayor Janet Taylor.

Despite the financial difficulties created by the current economy, the many mixed-use projects in the city's core provide a testament to Salem's leadership. So do the creation of the hugely popular Kroc Community Center, the arrival of Sanyo Solar and other projects.

Taylor grew in the job, an important trait for any public official. She entered office as a cheerleader for Salem, a role at which she continues to excel, but she also exhibited a growing understanding of the community's problems as well as its potential. She will be a tough act to follow.

Salem needs someone who will continue that momentum while reaching out to all segments of the community. Peterson has that track record.

Her community involvement is extensive, from co-founding No-Meth — Not in My Neighborhood to serving on the Marion County Public Safety Coordinating Council and the Oregon Symphony Board. She was a director for Commercial Bank and chairwoman of SEDCOR.

A big part of what the mayor can and should do in our minds is to bring city hall and city government to the people. Most people won't ever attend a city council meeting, and many will never have occasion to visit city hall.

Peterson will reach out to neighborhoods, community groups, churches and other groups; listen to their concerns; and bring their ideas to city hall. People want to see the mayor and to have the mayor be accessible. We are confident Peterson will excel at that.

Jobs are the top issue these days. Bennett has some interesting ideas. He says that while he supported Measures 66 and 67, he would lobby to repeal the tax that unprofitable businesses must pay on their gross sales. He also says the city needs to focus more of its economic

development on assisting businesses in Salem and not just on recruiting new businesses to Salem. Those are both good points.

In a meeting with the Statesman Journal Editorial Board, Bennett also asked: Who would you want sitting across from corporate CEOs considering moving to Salem. It is a good question, but we would have to answer that Peterson would be best in that role. She's personable. She listens. She connects with people. It's that personal touch that will make a huge difference.

One of the big reasons Sanyo Solar chose to build a facility in Salem is that the city made them feel welcome. Peterson would be able to do that for other companies. That said, we do wish Peterson had some better ideas about what she would do as mayor beyond go anywhere and do anything to recruit businesses.

However, it's easy to envision Peterson's interacting with people from all walks of life, whether a corporate CEO considering relocating to Salem, a small-business owner seeking to expand or a neighbor concerned about safety issues.

Not having served in elected office, she also will bring fresh eyes to how city hall operates. That, too, can be an advantage as mayor.

Among her goals are establishing a natural resources strategy group and creating a multicultural advisory council. She is the candidate who talks more about reaching out to Salem's diverse residents.

The next mayor, with the city council, will have to deal with difficult budget decisions. The city won't have enough money to pay for all the services it currently provides. Neither candidate touted many fresh ideas. But we know that dealing with the budget will require working with different stakeholders and a willingness to make tough, painful decisions. Peterson can do that.

Bennett currently represents Ward 1 — central and northeast Salem — on the city council and has lengthy experience on the city budget committee.

A former legislator and a lobbyist for the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, he knows his way around the halls of government. That expertise would be helpful in making Salem's case to state and federal officials and bring more grants into the city. We hope Bennett uses his expertise and the relationships he has built up to lobby more on the city's behalf as a councilman. While we think these skills are important, they do not trump the unique skills at building coalitions and connecting with people that Peterson brings.

He expects land use to be the second-biggest city issue, trailing only jobs and the economy. He appreciates the importance of smart planning and a well-thought-out connectivity/transit plan.

Like most Oregon cities, Salem has a weak-mayor form of government.

The mayor, who serves a two-year term, is the public face of the city and presides over city council meetings. But the city council sets policy and hires the city manager, who oversees the city's day-to-day operations. In that sense, the mayor is just one among nine votes on the city council.

Still, that ambassador role is important, whether it's in attracting employers or in building consensus on hot-button issues.

For the challenges that lie ahead, Anna Peterson is the better choice as Salem's mayor.