

FEATURED

## Commissioner candidates renew calls to pause manager hiring

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Trisha Murray, unaffiliated candidate for County Commission District 3, addresses the current commissioners with her concerns about them proceeding with hiring a new county manager so close to two of the three of them leaving office. District 1 commissioner candidate Scott Mijares, who is running unopposed, is at right and also spoke against proceeding. (Screenshot)

The current Montrose County commissioners should not proceed with hiring a new county manager so close to an election that will see two new county commissioners seated in January, commissioner candidate Scott Mijares reiterated Wednesday.

Commissioner candidate Trisha Murray later also expressed concerns about how quickly the county is replacing its retired manager, Jon Waschbusch, who resigned earlier this summer.

“Despite public outcry, you have decided to move forward with the vetting, interviewing and hiring of a county manager to manage our county’s business. This important position calls for a candidate that is well-qualified and works closely with the BOCC to ensure the board’s vision is implemented and that will move the county in a positive direction to better meet the citizen and community needs,” Mijares said during public comment at the commissioners’ meeting. “So I ask you, whose vision will this new county manager be implementing? Your vision, or the vision of the new board that the Montrose voters have entrusted with their future?”

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The public comment period was held before the county announced the names of three finalists for the county manager's job, Frank Rodriguez, Matt Smith and Mark Tyner, and information about the next steps in the hiring process. (See related story).

Mijares is running unopposed for the District 1 commission seat that Commissioner Roger Rash will vacate due to term limits. Mijares noted that while not yet formally elected, his seat on the board is inevitable. "In an effort to avoid a possible crisis between the BOCC and county management, I feel it is my civic duty to weigh in. I respectfully demand that you suspend all hiring efforts until November, when it is clear who will make up the new board. This new hire must work harmoniously with the newly elected board to do the county's business, and while your input is helpful, you should not have the final word on who serves at the pleasure of the new board of county commissioners," Mijares said. "This is the kind of leadership the people of Montrose deserve and this is the kind of leadership I intend to deliver."

Mijares suggested a meeting between the commissioner candidates, current commissioners and Interim County Manager Emily Sanchez, to discuss the importance and relevance of the will of the people who participated in the primary elections to select him as the District 1 candidate and Rick Dunlap as the District 3 Republican candidate. Murray is also running for District 3, but as an unaffiliated candidate; the winner of that race will replace term-limited Commissioner Keith Caddy.

Mijares also wanted discussion on current policy that limits the amount of time an interim county manager can serve to six months. "Can this policy be changed or adjusted? Can the county effectively conduct its business through an extended term, and will Emily Sanchez agree to continue her role as interim manager until a new county manager hiring process is complete?"

Mijares said Waschbusch's official departure date was Aug. 4 and six months from that time would be Feb. 4, 2025. The new board of county commissioners will have been seated by then. "So we have plenty of time to do what we need to do, including extend(ing) the interim term," he said.

Mijares also asked for all county commissioner candidates to be briefed on who has applied and is being considered further, along with any information that could assist the incoming board. He began saying he would be willing to sign a nondisclosure agreement, when Rash told him the three minutes speakers are allowed for public comment were up. Rash had earlier denied Mijares' request for four minutes.

Juli Mijares then approached the mic and was recognized. She attempted to yield her three minutes back to Scott Mijares.

"You're welcome to speak. Mr. Mijares has already spoken three minutes. We try to stick to the three-minute rule. Thank you. If you would wish to speak, go ahead," Rash said.

"Are there any other board members who might want to object — " Scott Mijares began, and Rash reiterated his time was up.

"I'm just asking. Do all the board members agree?" Mijares said.

"Please, Mr. Mijares. We need to move forward with this meeting," Rash responded.

"Is this as final decision? Is this what you want the public to see?"

"The public will see whatever. We do not address you at this time. Please sit down," Rash told Mijares, and asked if anyone else wanted to speak.

Murray came forward. "I do have a lot of concerns about the position of county manager and how it's being pushed forward so quickly, especially with a new board coming on," Murray said.

"I want to step back and remind Keith and Roger, that when you guys took office, there was a lot of changing going on with the county, a lot of housecleaning. Some of that was justified, some of it maybe not, I don't really know. But I know it caused a lot of tension with the employees of the county."

She also spoke of the decision to build what is now the Montrose County Event Center and indoor arena. That decision was made by a board prior to Caddy, Rash and Commissioner Sue Hansen being elected. "I feel like pushing this forward again also feels a lot like the Event Center, when the commissioners prior to you taking office pushed through the Event Center and it caused a lot of problems for you guys coming on board," Murray said. "And I think it's really important to sit and think about if the shoe were on your feet, how would you feel if outgoing commissioners were pushing a position that was of the highest of importance in the county on the newly elected officials and not giving them any say as to what was going on? I hope that you can consider that and know that it will have an impact on those taking office."

Some hours after the meeting, the county publicly released more information about the manager candidates, as well as announced a public meet and greet at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 10. As well, each commissioner candidate is to have time to interview the finalist, during private meetings.

When reached Thursday, Dunlap had concerns similar to Mijares' and Murray's.

"I wish they would leave it to the upcoming board, because the board has to work with that person," Dunlap said, cautioning that a new hire by the current board could be set up for failure if, for some reason, the successful candidate doesn't mesh with the new commissioners. "If I was one of the candidates, I would be concerned about it myself," Dunlap said, but stressed that he would not move to remove the new manager just because he wasn't the one to hire him.

"I would look at the job they've done prior. The three applicants, all three of them have great resumes and that type of thing. Absolutely not, I would not (terminate) just because I wasn't part of the process to hire that person. Maybe whoever it is, maybe they are a good fit," Dunlap said.

Mijares also said he had no concerns with the candidates themselves at this time, but reiterated his view that the county was rushing things. He also said the commissioner candidates are being asked to submit their questions for the manager candidates in advance. "It's all for optics. We have not been given any assurance our input will be given any consideration whatsoever," Mijares said in an email. He said he thinks the current commissioners are trying to extend their influence on a new administration and that Hansen is being given an unfair advantage as to who she wants to work with, while he and whichever candidate wins the District 3 race are being ignored.

Mijares also provided the full comments he had intended to read at the Wednesday meeting. In addition to what he stated Wednesday, these asked for a timeline for the hire and orientation, plus discussion and agreement on what the vetting process should include. He expressed "serious doubts" about the current board's judgment, saying Rash and Hansen had supported his primary challenger, Louis Stark, despite a 2018 BOCC resolution to refrain from backing any campaign or ballot measure.

Hansen on Wednesday told the Daily Press the current board of commissioners also was elected, and the commissioners know the ins and outs of the county due to lengthy experience running it. “There are three commissioners. Two have been running the county for nearly eight years now and me, six. Who better to choose the county manager?” Hansen said.

She detailed current projects, the ins and outs of the sheriff’s office — where there has been dispute over the application of the public safety sales tax fund — finances and other operational issues. Hansen said all three of the county manager finalists are well qualified, with exemplary leadership qualities.

“We’ll see. I think a lot of their (commissioner candidates) assertions are assertions and totally unfounded. Nonetheless, that’s where we are,” Hansen said.

Dunlap — who previously served as sheriff — said a new, incoming board could have a different vision for the county. “You have to look at the whole picture. I just feel that they should wait. What’s the rush?”

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