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Consultants mold council into a team

By MARK PETERS, Portland Press Herald Writer
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SOUTH PORTLAND — Borrowing from the corporate world, city councilors in South Portland have hired a consultant to work with them on leadership and teamwork. Councilors plan to spend as much as \$10,000 on retreats, one-on-one coaching and other activities that focus on working together and communicating better.

"You have to invest in your people. I am a firm believer in you get what you pay for," said Mayor Maxine Beecher.

The decision to hire KSH Strategyhouse, a Portland-based consulting firm, hasn't come from recent strife on the City Council. Instead, councilors say they want to become more effective leaders and prevent future problems among themselves.

"We get along. There are no splits in the council," said Councilor Kay Loring.

The use of consultants by elected officials is not uncommon, especially in larger towns and cities in Maine, said Michael Starn, spokesman for the Maine Municipal Association.

Typically, consultants are brought in when elected officials can't work together, Starn said, but it makes sense to have them help municipal officials who deal with multimillion-dollar budgets.

Councilor Linda Boudreau called hiring the consultant "preventive medicine." She referred to the town of Brooklin, where selectmen have hired a professional mediator because of discord in town.

But Gary Crosby, a former South Portland council candidate who frequently attends public meetings, says elected officials are wasting money by hiring a consultant.

If you ask voters to elect you, then you should have the ability to serve in office effectively without spending thousands of dollars to get outside help, Crosby said.

"It is incumbent on them to come to the table ready to work and not spend my tax dollars," he said.

Councilors started working with Strategyhouse last month after interviewing consultants who work with government and corporations, Beecher said.

For \$4,800, the consulting firm talked with councilors and top city officials, held a retreat at the city's community center and provided ongoing support. The retreat focused on councilors getting to know each other, discussing their leadership styles and building a team.

This week, councilors voted unanimously to retain Strategyhouse at \$100 per hour to do more work with them. City officials estimate the total cost could exceed \$10,000, which required a vote at Monday's council meeting.

The additional work with Strategyhouse will include individual coaching so councilors can work on "personal effectiveness" and "assessing leadership and communication styles," and plan future contributions to the city, according to a summary provided to the council.

Beecher made leadership training part of the goals she outlined during her inaugural address in December. She said councilors face complex issues as leaders of one of Maine's largest municipalities, but don't get basic education about their positions.

"I think municipal government is complex, and I think sometimes we jump into it and think we know what we are doing," said Councilor Rosemarie DeAngelis.

THE END

