

THE FALL OF FRICK FINN

Story by Ed Balint
Register City Hall reporter

After weathering many storms, the end came quickly for Sandusky's city manager.



Rick Finn was suspended for five days. He endured a 19-month ethics investigation. He went head first into a culture at City Hall that many said had to change and took on entrenched staffers. He survived a ton of battles. That Finn survived the skirmishes makes it all the more

shocking how quickly his demise came when he was forced to resign Tuesday.

He went from a city manager who weathered everything to a city manager who was on his way out within a span of 16 days.

Finn was forced to resign or be fired.

He resigned about 3 p.m. Tuesday as part of an agreement that included his salary for five more months and his promise to not sue the city over his employment.

In the aftermath, Finn's staunch supporters claim the city manager's departure was the result of whiny workers and a witch-hunt.

"The people who wanted to see Rick gone wouldn't let it rest," said former commissioner Dave Stein.

But commissioners who wanted Finn gone said they weren't personally motivated. They questioned his leadership and the way he treated employees.

"It was not a vendetta by any means," Commissioner Ed Feick said.

Finn's end came after two new commissioners led an investigation into a rash of resignations by employees in critical positions.



Register photos — LARRY PETERSON

Finn and ex-officio Mayor Lee Silvani talk during the council meeting May 11 at which the commissioners' report on Finn's leadership was released. Silvani remains one of Finn's staunchest defenders. **Above**, Finn reacts to some of the comments during the same meeting.

Those interviewed said their clashes with Finn were the main reason they left city ranks. All the comments were placed into a report that hit like

a lightning bolt May 12.

They painted Finn as a power monger, poor leader and dishonest manager who coddled a select group of employees.

Finn said those employees didn't embrace change. His backers said he was never given a chance to defend himself against those attacks.

Former employees interviewed were: Chief Planner Gary Boyle; Community Development Director Rita McMahon; Law Directors Duffield Millie and Mark Repp; City Planner Carrie Smith and Tim Lloyd; a former assistant to the city engineer.

City Engineer Brent Smith, who has resigned and will leave in July, was also interviewed.

Among those interviewed were some of the most credible staffers in city ranks,

Finn

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which commissioners said made the revelations all the more startling. Of that group, some left for what were considered lateral moves, not lucrative promotions.

But even commissioners who criticized Finn acknowledged he accomplished projects and was a decent administrator in some respects. Supporters said the city will reap the benefits of Finn's hard work on economic development projects yet to blossom. They also said the manager added a professional touch to the office, and they say he was demanding and aggressive because that's why he was hired.

"I think you'll find an extremely dedicated city manager who was doing the best he could for this community despite the slings and arrows of small-town politics," Stein said. "He didn't survive yet his legacy will live on."

Strangely, Finn was brought in to replace a city manager who resigned when the commissioners at the time sought a new direction. Frank Link had headed the city for about two decades.

Finn's end may have started Jan. 1, 1996

Although the new commission forced Finn to resign, it wasn't the first time commissioners had considered the move.

Rumblings at City Hall started about two-and-a-half years ago, according to former commissioner George Mylander.

"The last month of course has been extreme, but I think I can trace it back to Jan. 1, 1996," he said. That's when Mylander and commissioners John Mears and Leroy Sizemore left the commission because of term limits.

"We were ... dominant factors in the operation of the city commission and we had the support of others and seemed to prevail in many situations," Mylander said.

"With our departure, it created a leadership void which I think has led to many of the things that have occurred in the last two-and-a-half years," he said.

Posturing by commissioners began when the Ohio Ethics Commission investigated an alleged conflict of interest regarding a consulting fee Finn received. In January 1996, Finn accepted more than \$400 from Resource Management Associates of Illinois for helping select a new police chief for Fremont. About a month later, the firm was hired to do a \$4,200 study of the Sandusky Police Department's scheduling scheme.

A grand jury reviewed the case this past September but didn't indict Finn.

But his credibility was bruised significantly.

This episode triggered the first wave of sentiments to fire Finn.

While Finn was suspended for five days in January 1996 because of the incident, Mylander said some commissioners weren't satisfied. The suspension was a compromise because at that time three of the

seven commissioners wanted Finn out, Commissioner John Fenton said.

Noting there was never enough support to fire Finn, Fenton said there was nothing concerned commissioners could do to change what they perceived as the city manager's micro-managing of city government.

New commissioners were beginning of end

Two new commissioners have been at the center of the events leading to Finn's final days.

Finn's backers have labeled Feick and Commissioner Suanne Brown dissidents on a mission to fire the city manager.

City workers and many residents have complimented them for avoiding political pressures and getting something done that they believe has been long overdue — Finn's resignation.

"I think they were predisposed to getting rid of him," Stein said of Brown and Feick. But, he added, "I think they honestly think they did the best thing for the city of Sandusky or they wouldn't have voted that way."

After the new group got down to business in January, some commissioners wanted to take another look at Finn, according to Feick.

Feick and Brown say they were objective from the start. They and Commissioner Mike Kresser were elected last November for terms beginning in January.

When Feick came on board, he said he was approached by some current commissioners whom he claims wanted to fire Finn. He said he wanted no part of it and wanted to give Finn a chance.

Fenton and Kresser had questioned Finn in the past. Ex-officio Mayor Lee Silvani and Vice Mayor Frank Valli's support of Finn never wavered. Previously, Commissioner Al Mason had been concerned about the ethics investigation but he didn't give credence to the recent resignation report because names weren't attached to comments.

While on the campaign trail, Feick said some residents told him to get elected and lead a charge to fire Finn.

"If we were elected to get rid of Rick, he would have been gone in January," Feick said. "I was very sincere. I did not know the man."

Said Kresser, "I don't think anybody was out to get Rick Finn. I don't believe that; I don't want to believe that."

Feick said he didn't begin questioning Finn's performance until the resignations.

"The resignations really bothered me," he said. "I knew all of them. They were all good workers."

Brown concurred. However, she said she was never approached by any commissioners in January about firing Finn.

"Ed and I both adopted a wait-and-see attitude and that is absolutely true," she said.

Before she became a commissioner, Brown had been aware of the ethics investigation and said Finn "did some things I didn't necessarily agree with. When the media and citizens started asking why (workers were leaving the city), it was our duty to ask why."

Concern over Finn snowballed in a short period between late April and early May.

During the investigation into the resignations, Finn propped up as a lead candidate for the community development director's job a former city manager with a background of political turmoil.

"It did not help Mr. Finn at all," Brown said. Although Brown said Finn had informed her of the candidate's political past, she said it caused her to question his "efficiency and effectiveness by trying to get someone who was controversial."

Kresser said the possible appointment may have been a contributing factor. Feick said it was never an issue with him.

But as that troubled candidate dropped out of view, another Finn battle was brewing.

Feick questioned the legality of Finn's weekly breakfast meetings that had been going on for several years. Legal consultants said the meetings were legal but had the appearance of violating the spirit of open meetings law.

However, this surfaced when a core of commissioners already appeared to have had their minds made up on Finn's future.

Silvani believes one commissioner, whom he declined to name, ruthlessly led others on a crusade to oust Finn.

"It only took one to get the ball rolling and then you always have followers," he said. "They had to get their game plans together."

Following the resignation report, Kresser said, "With all that was going on, Rick had become ineffective because he had so much going against him."

Sentiments were Feick, Brown and Fenton wanted to move Finn out while Silvani, Valli and Mason supported Finn.

Kresser, who wasn't a Finn fan in his previous term that ended in 1993, became the swing vote in recent weeks.

Instead of pushing for a vote to fire Finn, Kresser spearheaded the agreement that resulted in the city manager's resignation. Although he's running for an Erie County commissioner seat, he said that never influenced his thoughts on the Finn situation.

Of the blasting Finn took in the report, Kresser said, "I think I could believe some of it ... but it wasn't whether you believe it or not — it's the fact it was out there and people did believe it."

"It was a tough decision to make but I believe for the betterment of the city and the betterment of Mr. Finn, it was just time," he said. "I just didn't see this going away."

What was despised about Finn was why he was hired

Ironically, supporters say, Finn was apparently forced out because he exhibited the management style he was hired to implement.

"We wanted someone with the characteristics I guess some are blaming him for," Mylander said.

In the resignation report, words such as dictator and liar were used by former employees to describe Finn.

Responsiveness to the public,

holding employees accountable and outlining goals for the city were all qualities commissioners looked for when hiring Finn.

"We needed someone who was aggressive, who was a strong leader," Mylander said.

In recent weeks, Mylander said, Finn displayed his character by not firing back at his opponents.

"He was very professional during this whole process," he said. "The people involved who attacked him, he didn't go after them."

Finn did not respond to an inquiry for this story.

While visiting Finn at his home the night of his resignation, Mylander said the former city manager never spoke negatively of any officials. When recounting the visit, Mylander paused to keep from crying.

When Mylander was leaving Finn's home, he said Finn said, "Look after the mayor," referring to Silvani, who was Finn's closest ally to the end and offered to resign this week in the fallout of Finn's resignation.

"No one is perfect," he said. "I'm sure there are two sides to a lot of issues. It's quite possible there were certain relationships that became strained, but I don't think Mr. Finn was ever given the opportunity to explain."

Finn's legacy in Sandusky

Stein said history will treat Finn well.

He mentioned a new method of collective bargaining Finn introduced for city unions, his detailed work on budgets, his vision and a community survey that was his idea.

"Right now, the city is in good financial shape. There's some projects on the burner and now I really don't know what's going to happen to some of those things," Mylander said.

Mylander credited Finn for being

instrumental in developing the Bay-side Business Park and for working with the county to get the county parking garage at a city spot that used to be a hole in downtown.

Officials and residents have praised Finn for always being willing to talk to them about their concerns — whether it was in his office or at a bowling alley.

Don Schwanger, a regular at commission meetings who routinely had heated debates with Finn, said he didn't know what went on behind closed doors at City Hall, but he feels the city manager was rushed out.

"I'm satisfied with what Rick Finn did," he said. "We've had an awful lot of improvements in the past five years."

Residents and officials have credited Finn for ridding of an environment where some workers didn't answer to the public. Scenes of several workers filling time by riding around in trucks and standing around on the job faded under Finn, they said.

"Nobody has said Rick is a bad guy, nobody said Rick didn't do his job. He did," Kresser said. "He got caught up in a controversy. In the midst of the controversy, not every one was functioning at 100 percent of their capacity."

Settlement lets both sides move on with life

Finn turned in his city keys

Tuesday evening, but his fate was sealed about three weeks ago when some commissioners considered voting to fire him. Instead, with Finn and his family in mind, a resolution was crafted.

But two weeks and a day passed before an agreement was official.

At first, Finn reportedly wasn't satisfied with the city's terms which revolved around several months of pay as long as he was available as an advisor and the pledge he wouldn't sue the city over employment issues.

Feick and Brown said Finn countered the initial settlement by asking to continue working as the city manager for the rest of the year and requesting a \$10,000 bonus.

After commissioners balked, Finn agreed to be paid \$39,590.98 to be available as an advisor until Nov. 1 along with several other conditions.

Finn supporters, who have been relentlessly steadfast to the end, believe the nature of the report that led to Finn's departure and the way commissioners presented it publicly may make it difficult to get a new city manager.

Commissioners, meanwhile, say it's time to move on without animosity.

Kresser sighed. "It might be your brother," he said of Finn. "Let's let him go; let's get on with running the city."

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