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Chicago suburb charms Ferndale city manager

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Barwin to leave post mid-summer

By Jennie Miller
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FERNDALE — Tom Barwin is exiting his post in less than a month, leaving Ferndale behind as he takes a position as city manager of the Village of Oak Park, Illinois.

Barwin has served as the Ferndale City Manager for the last eight years, helping to take the community and it's now booming downtown in an entirely new direction. He's proud of the time he's spent here and all he's helped accomplish.

"It's been a tremendous experience, and I'm very lucky to have had truly an outstanding group of elected officials to partner with," Barwin said of his time in Ferndale. "Because of that, we've gotten a lot done. We've maintained excellent city services in a cutback environment. Our infrastructure is really up to snuff. I think those things have led to the regeneration of our central business district, many streetscape and beautification projects, and a tax base that has grown in the top tier of Oakland County consistently over the last seven or eight years.

"We have potential investors looking here. This year alone, there are 200 housing starts, including \$40 million worth of condominiums, lofts and single-family dwellings, which is the greatest building explosion we've seen here since the 1950s. And, all this in a rather uncertain economy."

Barwin said he wasn't actively looking for a new position, but the Village of Oak Park offered him a "pretty attractive package." He also has two children who reside in Chicago.

Many city officials are disappointed to see Barwin go.

"Obviously, I'm saddened to be losing Tom," said Ferndale Mayor Robert Porter. "Tom has a special touch when it comes to a visionary perspective and standing up firmly for his beliefs. He's been very instrumental in the redevelopment in the community.

"But I'm also glad for Tom because, with his skills and the opportunities this offers him, I think it's a perfect fit. (He) gets to keep practicing the stuff he really loves to do, and he gets a few extra bucks to do it."

Ferndale City Councilman Scott Galloway said Ferndale wouldn't be where it is today without Barwin.

"Ferndale's renaissance came about because of Tom's vision," he said. "He will be missed."

Barwin was well known in the region for his efforts to rally support for a regional transit system.

"I think Tom's was a voice in the wilderness when he started, because no one was really talking about it, but now you see a coalition forming, and it has really come around," Galloway said.

The move will provide Barwin with the opportunity to enjoy the pleasures and convenience a transit system provides.

"They have a couple transit lines running through town," Barwin said. "That was a big motivation for me to have the chance to live and work in a community like the one we've long been trying to build and create here."

But there's more to it than just that.

"It's a fresh start," he said. "I really want to reflect on everything I've learned here and go

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in there with a lot of energy to keep moving their priorities forward. It's a very progressive community, like Ferndale is. They have a very storied past and an ambitious future ahead of them."

Oak Park, Illinois, and Ferndale have many similarities.

"Ferndale is about four square miles and Oak Park is five," he said. "We border Detroit, whereas they border Chicago. We are eight miles north of the Detroit River; Oak Park is eight miles west of Lake Michigan. The only real difference is that it's a bit more densely populated. Ferndale has 22,000 residents; Oak Park has 52,000.

The Ferndale City Council is holding a special meeting July 10, immediately following its regular meeting, to discuss what comes next.

"We'll probably hire an interim city manager and a recruiter to help us find a permanent replacement," Galloway said. "We want to put it on the fast track to get somebody good. I'd like to see someone younger, with fresh ideas and the energy to take on what is sometimes a very difficult job."

Porter said that no matter how beneficial a city manager can be, "we all have our frailties," and so the City Council will discuss the areas in which they'd like to be stronger.

"We'll form a recruitment plan and then we'll move on," he said.

Barwin has some advice for his successor.

"It's been all about working on keeping and improving the quality of life," he said. "Life is to be enjoyed and communities are where we have the most opportunity to do that."

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