Altman: Philly on track despite challenges

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By Thomas J. Walsh
and Kellie Patrick Gates
For PlanPhilly

At the last Philadelphia City Planning Commission meeting, on May 19, the final vote on the final agenda item was taken at about 6 p.m. – some five hours after the meeting commenced. Even by municipal government standards, it was a marathon. The docket was packed with thorny legal issues, short- and long-term implications for the city, and each subject seemed to garner a queue of citizens eager to give their three minutes of testimony (usually more), in addition to lengthy discussions among the commissioners themselves.

When it appeared all was wrapped up for the day, Commission Chair Andy Altman said, “Anybody want a motion to adjourn?” There was immediate laughter. It wasn’t clear he meant to be funny, but, not missing a beat, he quipped, “Anybody want to re-hear any item? Anyone?” That got even louder laughs from those still left in the room, not least his fellow commissioners.

Altman was clearly settled in to his new job, steering the conversations where they needed to go, handing the con to Vice Chair Alan Greenberger when necessary, reining in overly loquacious public comment and adding context – via his own opinion – when he felt it was appropriate. Since early in 2009, Altman seemed to have a handle, at least in public, on the monumental task handed to him by Mayor Michael Nutter more than a year ago. He was large and in charge.

So the question, from locals and national observers, is, “What now?”

Especially since it comes on the heels of the resignation of another high-profile city player – Director of Sustainability Mark Alan Hughes – what happens now that Altman has understandably accepted the proverbial offer he can’t refuse? Now that he is off to one of the most attractive cities on the planet, London, to prepare for the 2012 Olympics and the long-term redevelopment of that city’s East End, who will replace the first cabinet-level deputy mayor to hold down two major city departments – planning and commerce?

All quiet
The answers, of course, can only be written off as “forthcoming.” Nutter himself only found out about it recently, and other senior city officials have not had much to say this week, except that Altman has moved the ball considerably with respect to the mayor’s stated goal of rendering Philadelphia the nation’s preeminent city for planning.

“It is not a setback,” said Peter Kelsen, a land use attorney at Blank Rome LLP and a city Zoning Code commissioner. “This is very normal. It’s very common to have senior policy folks and deputies move on,
especially around the second year of an administration.”

Particularly with Altman, Kelsen’s been amused by rumors of his departure that circulated even before he started. “People were saying back then, ‘He’s not coming!’ In Andy’s situation right now, [London] is a once in a lifetime opportunity. If you’re Andy Altman and you don’t take that, you’re really doing yourself a disservice.”

Altman, in an interview with PlanPhilly on Friday, said that he had no plans to seek work elsewhere. “Contrary to the rumors, I’ve actually never been leaving,” he said. “I found (the rumors) amusing, and annoying to be honest. My family was here – we moved here. My kids are in school here. I was not looking for something. "If I had wanted to leave, I would have left, if it was a matter of being frustrated. I think we’ve got great momentum here, and I’ve gotten great support from the mayor. He was there when I needed him, and he’s a great leader.”

As for Hughes, “Mark Alan was a gift, from my perspective,” Kelsen said. “He took this [new Sustainability Department] over and put in place some heavy framework. To lose a guy like that is always unfortunate, but not unexpected.” (Editor’s note: On Tuesday, check PlanPhilly for a story that includes a lengthy interview with Hughes on the next steps for the Sustainability Department, and the new Greenworks initiative Hughes shepherded into place.)

The mayor’s ear
“They are two very talented individuals that were selected for those positions, and the tough part is now coming up with replacements to carry on,” said Greg Byrnes, a longtime regional commercial real estate expert who spent many years as PECO Energy’s director of economic development. “Hopefully, Nutter will be able to do that. People want to work for him.”

Byrnes said there are positives and negatives to looking outside the city to fill the voids left by Altman and Hughes. “On the minus side, it’s going to take someone up to six months just to get up to speed with what’s going on and meet the players,” he said. “If someone has equal ability, headhunters say to go with the local person. But it’s really about finding individuals who can be collaborative and work with other players throughout the region, and sometimes that’s easier for someone coming in from the outside.”

For Leanne Krueger-Braneky, executive director of the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia, one of the most important considerations for replacements is the ability to directly communicate with the mayor. It’s a concern she shares with many in the business community, nonprofit and for-profit alike.

For both Hughes and Altman, that direct back-and-forth with Nutter is something plain to see, say those doing business with them, instilling a sense of confidence that the city has been on a positive trajectory, despite the massive budget shortfalls in the wake of the disastrous national economy.

“There has been a sense of appreciation by people dealing with the departments that things are moving,” said
Natalia Olson de Savickyj, a transportation planner who has worked closely with both men in her positions on both the Planning and Zoning Code commissions, along with her involvement with Krueger-Braneky’s green jobs initiative. “Maybe not moving as quickly as they want, but at least they know what to expect. That is key, right there, and the whole point of having everything under one person, in Andy’s case – streamlining the process and improving communication.”

**Anacostia, Delaware, Thames**

Altman was beckoned back to his hometown of Philadelphia after a nationwide search for a planner with a track record of making a significant difference. It was a similar scenario with a previous job in another East Coast city with a decaying, marginalized river – Washington, D.C. and its Anacostia River, which had always been an afterthought to the Potomac.

“Mayor [Anthony] Williams found Andy in Oakland,” said Sean Madigan, district spokesman for the city’s Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development. “He was looking to hire one of the preeminent planners in the whole country. They brought Andy up to a bluff overlooking the Anacostia and said, ‘We really need to reclaim this long forgotten river.’

“Andy inherited a planning office that was barely operating. They didn’t have the ear of past mayors. Mayor Williams looked to Andy to make it preeminent, and he hired staff from all over the place – people with prestigious degrees, experts in their fields. He was sort of a force of nature.”

During those years – roughly the first half of this decade – Madigan covered Altman’s doings as a reporter for the Washington Business Journal. What he says about him now might be upsetting to those here in Philadelphia that had such high hopes for Altman.

“He came up with these big-picture, iconic visions of what the District could become,” Madigan recalled. “With the mayor, he really set in motion the renaissance of the downtown.”

In particular, two desolate neighborhoods, NoMa (North of Massachusetts Ave.) and the Mount Vernon Triangle, went from vice-infested wastelands to burgeoning areas of mixed-used redevelopment, with new condominiums, offices, restaurants and high-profile new tenants such as National Public Radio and the U.S. Justice Department.

“Those are outside of the Anacostia riverfront, on which he put his biggest imprimatur,” Madigan said. “There, he was really able to bring in the federal government ... and he was able to bring everybody together. For years and years, people came and made grand declarations and nothing ever got done. People who lived there were rightfully very suspicious. [Altman and his team] really had to work hard to make an inclusive plan.

“His biggest challenge, and what he was very successful at doing, was that he was able to convince people that the Anacostia represented an enormous resource and that it was their asset, and could really reap the benefits from working with the city.”

Ouch?
That could’ve been us, said a few Philadelphians this week, feeling a little high-and-dry with the one-two punch of Hughes, and then Altman, announcing their departures about a week apart. The Philly blogs were buzzing with disgruntled posts, invariably straying into commentary about the city’s casino situation, or the city’s reputation for not being able to retain the big brains, or other reasons.

But both men said it will be us, given the platforms now in place and the commitment of Nutter to a long-range plan that is set up through what would be the last year of an assumed two-term administration.

“Obviously I liked both of them and really hoped they could deliver on a real progressive vision for the city,” said Brad Maule, editor of the widely read PhillySkyline.com and a resident of Fishtown. “I think Hughes did – spearheading Greenworks is huge. But it's a shame he's not gonna stick around to see that it works. It can, and should.

“Altman, though – that he's leaving is a real blow,” Maule said. “I don't begrudge him taking on the opportunity of a lifetime. Who would say no to the Olympics in London? But he was back in his hometown for less than a year and a half as one of Nutter's what, top three guys? And he's out, just like that.”

Altman said the timing of his and Hughes’ departures was coincidental. “It was individual circumstances, not a pattern,” he said. When the London Olympics officials called, Altman said he and his wife had just found a house they wanted to purchase.

Many of the aforementioned bloggers were, like Maule, residents of resurgent river wards, and young – in their 20s or 30s. Just as much as the big-name hires, they have been instrumental as part of the Nutter Administration’s goal of revitalization by better connecting neighborhoods to the water.

The free agent
As it was with Washington and its Anacostia, Altman was hired to quarterback that game plan. When Nutter dismantled the often-criticized Penn's Landing Corp. and replaced it with the Delaware River Waterfront Corp., he tapped Altman as chairman, giving him even more responsibility with a new agency charged with not only revamping the waterfront, but doing so in a fully transparent manner. Those efforts are just now underway.

Altman’s office has also lead the efforts to create a Master Plan of Development for the Central Delaware, based on the Civic Vision for the Central Delaware put together by PennPraxis after more than a year of community input. Altman has also overseen work aimed at turning Pier 11 into public greenspace, perhaps the first discernable step in that process.

He was the captain of a “dream team” for the waterfront master plan “that made sense in terms of developers’ points of view and in quality development,” said Steve Weixler, chairman of the Central Delaware Advocacy Group (CDAG).

He is one of a number of city planners and developers who wonder if Altman was uniquely suited to run both Planning and Commerce. “Andy is leaving us big shoes to fill, having done both of those jobs at the same time,” said Weixler, whose group lobbies for implementation of the Civic Vision and is comprised of waterfront
neighborhood representatives. He said Altman’s “no-nonsense approach to practical development” was good for keeping visions for the future grounded in what could actually be accomplished. “He had a realistic view point,” Weixler said.

Instead of a dream team here in Philly, Altman is headed to what many consider a dream job for any planner. He will be the chief executive officer of the British government’s Olympic Park Legacy Co., overseeing the development of the built environment for the 2012 Olympics, and perhaps more challenging, the aftermath of the Games, when his job will continue with the long-term aspects of London’s East End transformation.

“It’s probably the coolest job in the world, and that’s why it’s so great for him,” Hughes said. “It’s a great match between a job and his talents.”

Altman said he regrets the timing—he wishes the London Olympics were farther off and he could spend more time in his current job. But he simply could not turn down this opportunity.

"Rarely in your life do you get a chance to be a part of building a city within a city," he said. "The Olympics are really a huge infrastructure project. And this is a huge infrastructure project centered on a huge transit system."

Altman said he's intrigued by the scale, the complexity, and the deadline – it has to be done for the games. “That's really exciting. It's very daunting and humbling, but also very exciting."

The dual role
Altman's expertise in both planning and commercial development allowed him to excel as deputy mayor over both areas, said Harris Steinberg, executive director of PennPraxis, the practical arm of the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Design. While Altman got up-to-speed with his role as a senior deputy mayor, the PennPraxis Civic Vision and Action plans gave Altman a jump-start for the Central Delaware riverfront.

Steinberg has no recommendations on who could next fill the position. He knows of no one who has all of the needed skills – never mind actually wanting become a liaison as well as a mediator between planners and developers, groups that do not always see eye-to-eye.

“Inherently, there is a tension between the different worlds of planning and development,” he said. In addition to holding the requisite professional skills, the next person in a dual role would also need political savvy “to operate well in the Philadelphia environment,” Steinberg said.

In fact, it’s so rare that one person would possess all those abilities that the Nutter Administration may be better off going back to two people to head up Commerce and Planning, Steinberg said. As a planner, Steinberg is especially worried that the next person would excel on the development side, but not share Altman’s conviction that good planning is critical for good development.

“I’m coming from the planning side, from the physical development and urban design side, which tends to get short shrift in a highly politicized development climate such as Philadelphia," Steinberg said. "What Andy was able to do in his short time here was to shift the balance so that planning took the lead.”
But Steinberg might be surprised to know that he shares his opinion – if only in outcome and not principle – with Michael Sklaroff, a real estate attorney at Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll, LLP in Center City. Sklaroff represents a consortium called the Developers Workshop and is often at odds with Steinberg over what he views as restrictions on privately held properties within the PennPraxis overlay district.

“Generally in the development community, Andy was highly respected and extremely well-liked, accessible and positive,” said Sklaroff. “But there is a sense that the city has been focusing more on process, and the planning process. The city needs to get more traction in economic development. I’m not sure Andy had enough time to get a better sense of the nuts and bolts of economic development in the city – there are extraordinary challenges in the economic environment that are really unprecedented.

“The challenge is to find somebody who can hit the deck running,” Sklaroff said. “I hope the mayor considers separate directors for Planning and Commerce, given where we are right now. Job creation, growing the city and strengthening the tax base have taken on a real urgency.”

Byrnes said it is indeed significant that Altman and Nutter have consolidated and placed “strong control” over economic development within the Commerce Department, reclaiming a role that for decades had been outsourced to the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corp. (PIDC).

“Obviously PIDC is very effective and a great organization,” Byrnes said. “But I think they are now taking direction from the mayor and from Altman. I think that’s the first time I’ve really seen that in the city, where Commerce is that strong.”

Still, the only real development in the city since the beginning of the Nutter Administration has consisted of Bart Blatstein’s Northern Liberties initiatives, the Convention Center expansion and some major building among “eds and meds” (universities and hospitals). Even among those projects, all have been years in the making, underway well before the bottom fell out of the financial markets. Developers “are basically just in survival mode for the time being,” Byrnes said.

Steinberg said that while he is comforted by what he calls the strong leadership of Planning Commission Executive Director Alan Greenberger, he’s concerned about what might be a vacuum of leadership at Commerce. “My recommendation is that there is a careful rethinking of the position, and the relationship between planning and development within the Nutter administration, rather than automatically refilling the position,” he said.

Others, including Kelsen, want to keep the dual role model that has proven successful under Altman. “The fact that the economy has cratered makes it even more essential to have one person there,” Kelsen said. “If you want to attract development, you centralize your planning and you have your incentives all in one place. This is a model I’ve seen in other cities that works. The time to bring all your sources to bear in one place is right now, when we are re-grouping.”

Olson agreed, saying Altman helped establish a role that “represents the balance needed” between the
departments.

“But I’m a little concerned about Commerce and the economic development part of this big entity that he ruled,” she said. “It has to play a bigger role than its been playing. Our economy is doing so badly that rather than just cutting services, we have to do more with how we do business attraction, and going after bids and after leads, and not just waiting for people to come. We really need to be more aggressive in the commercial economic development part.”

That said, Altman has things set up nicely for his successor, she added. “People looked up to the fact that he, as a planner, had taken this role and understood it.” Having Altman onboard also helped attract one of the city’s biggest current assets, Olson said.

That would be Greenberger, who left a long-standing, private and lucrative ownership stake in a Center City architectural firm to work with the team Nutter was assembling. “People really respect Alan,” she said. “He’ll be able to continue the work Andy started. We have such a great opportunity right now with the [federal] recovery money or with green jobs and training, we’re at a good stage, and I feel we just need that next push.”

The upshot

“Andy was a key partner in all this work, from making sure I had access to all the human and technical resources that the city Planning Commission staff had, as well as just being a very close intellectual colleague to bounce ideas off,” said Hughes, whose last day on the job is June 18.

“As we’ve moved over these last few months from design into implementation, partly catalyzed by the [federal recovery dollars], he and the people that reported to him have really taken the lead on what was just simply policy to actual project development.”

As an example, Hughes cited the new citywide “weatherization” efforts. “With tying federal resources to local challenges, his shop has been in charge.”

Unlike Altman, Hughes never intended to spend more than two years in government work, and will return to academia, he has said. “My thing is on the very measurable calendar of doing it for a year, and then Greenworks is launched,” Hughes said. “Andy’s thing was the completely unexpected perfect job that came along.”

The upshot is that Philly planning is once again “in the big leagues,” internationally, Kelsen said. “I think it’s a compliment to the city that London picks Philadelphia’s deputy mayor for planning. We should be pretty proud of that.”

Similarly, Altman said his selection says something good about Philadelphia.

“The reputation right now, from what I saw over there, is that people are seeing that Philadelphia is a major city dealing with some very complicated challenges and doing it well,” Altman said. “The reputation of the mayor and the city are very good right now. There have been articles in The Economist about the challenges in
Philadelphia and how the mayor has handled them."

And, just as he was hired to do, Altman believes the city is starting to reclaim its old reputation for leadership in planning.

While it will be a while before his departing, formal recommendations for the mayor are ready, Altman does have some early advice for his successor: "To seize the moment, really, and not be discouraged by the economy and the budget – which are a tough reality everywhere," he said.

“Philadelphia is well-positioned as being seen as a place where, even in this economy, progressive and innovative things are happening.”

Contact the reporters at thomaswalsh1@gmail.com or kelliespatrick@gmail.com.

ON THE WEB:

(http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/09/AR2005100901151.html)