

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

A solid legacy

In 2006, when the United Way of Hampshire County was in need of a new chief executive officer, members of the organization's board of directors pledged a national search to find the right person.

After scrutinizing applications that came in from far and wide, they settled on John Ebbets of Hatfield.

Ebbets had previously worked at Clear Channel Radio in Springfield and had been the marketing and advertising director at the Daily Hampshire Gazette. He'd also been involved in a number of local volunteer efforts and had served as president of the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce.

Choosing a local candidate is by no means a guarantee of success. But, in the wake of last week's announcement that Ebbets is moving on, a look back at the record suggests that in this case the United Way chose well.

Ebbets took over at a time of turmoil and uncertainty for one of this area's most important organizations. Year in and year out the United Way's fundraising efforts support the agencies that serve the most vulnerable among us — the poor, the homeless, the sick, the hungry and those who have suffered from abuse or neglect.

Two of Ebbets' predecessors had resigned abruptly after relatively short tenures. One of them had sought to implement sweeping structural and visionary changes that created new concerns about the organization's focus and its ability to raise the money that is the lifeblood of its more than two dozen member agencies. He also came on board as the country was sliding into a deep recession that would further imperil those fundraising efforts.

Ebbets doubled down on the United Way's core mission and on what it would take to carry it out. As the public voice of the organization, he



JOHN EBBETS

articulated a clear message about its goals and set a positive tone.

While he acknowledged the severe challenges posed by the downsizing at many local companies, he also stressed an upbeat confidence in the generosity of those who live in this community. He consistently emphasized the "buy local" angle of what the United Way is all about — that is, raising local money to help local people and strengthen local institutions. He drew on his knowledge of the area and his contacts with many business and civic leaders to search out potential new donors.

Under his direction, the United Way saw an increase in the annual campaign for each of his years there. The

current campaign is closing in on its goal of raising \$1.25 million by June 30.

Ebbets will depart at the end of July for his new job as director of development for the Fine Arts Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. There, he will be in a position to bolster the center's already growing role as a regional showcase for international arts.

As the search for a replacement at United Way begins, Christine Shirtcliff, chair of the organization's board of directors, will be at the helm.

Commenting on Ebbets' departure, Shirtcliff noted that he was leaving behind an organization that is "alive and well. The campaign is in a good place, we have good relationships with our partners and our office staff is stable."

That's a solid legacy and one that the United Way will be able to build on as it moves ahead.