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Lazio's long walk ends

By CHAD DRURY Courier staff writer
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Mayor Tom Lazio presides over an Ottumwa City Council meeting Nov. 16 in council chambers at City Hall in Ottumwa first elected in 2013.

The Courier file photo



Sometime a little over eight years ago, Tom Lazio needed clarity, but he didn't find it in Ottumwa.

Instead, he found it with his wife, Peg, on the famed Walk Across Spain, the El Camino.

Approached by a couple of Ottumwa residents about running for mayor in 2013, and after initially calling them "crazy," he took time to weigh his decision. He was already a well-known and charismatic figure in the community, seemingly a good choice to run against Frank Flanders.

On that walk, he found his answer.

"I had a lot of time to think about it, and so it really helped me to get kind of realistic about, 'OK, there were a couple things I wanted to do,'" the 77-year-old Lazio said in his City Hall office, a handful of days before his third, and final, term as mayor ends Jan. 3 at noon. "(I wanted) better communication with the mayor's office, put out more information from the city. I wanted a downtown that would have economic development, and have better involvement from the public ...

"So as we walked across Spain, there were a lot of hours of just one foot in front of the other," he said. "I can honestly say I've followed up on every phone call and email I've gotten, even though people may not have always appreciated the response. Has everything worked out perfect? No."

Lazio admits there were things that didn't go as planned, that he had to weather adversity, but that other things have been a blessing to the city. He doesn't get a vote on the city council, but he helps guide strategy and direction.

As with any job, there are ups and downs, but Lazio never would've experienced them had he not finally taken up his friends' offer to run for mayor.

Mr. Unbeatable

Lazio was a perfect 3-0 in general elections for mayor, with his first two elections for two-year terms. In both of his contested races — in 2013 and 2017 — he won by landslide against Flanders and Robert LaPoint, respectively. He also won a primary in 2017, and ran unopposed in 2015.

"I did run into some strong opposition, because one of the people that ran against me, you know, wanted to use some dirt and just throw things at you about your family or past history. It was hard," Lazio recalled. "I would say (the campaigns) were fairly reasonable and cordial. They weren't ugly, ugly. I always said to keep the elections on the issues, not the personalities."

The ups and downs

More than anything else throughout his three terms, the undeveloped St. Joseph Square gnaws at Lazio. The concept was sound — a housing development in north central Ottumwa on about 10 acres of land — and would have given the city a much-needed housing boost.

Yet, the wide-open space remains bare because of financial difficulties with Blackbird Investments, the developer of the project. It took four years just to get the old St. Joseph hospital demolished.

"I want to be clear that that's not a city project, because it was private developer who bought the land and made a lot of promises," Lazio said. "But we wanted to be supportive and I was certainly supportive because I saw the potential for it.

"But it has been a disappointment that they haven't followed through, because there were so many expectations and such possibilities."

Target also left on Lazio's watch, though that was a corporate decision affecting 13 different stores, and that building has been repurposed into the new Veterans Affairs building. However, landing a Bridge View Center hotel project less than two years after a

previous agreement fell through, and adding low- to- moderate-income housing with the Bonita Avenue project will bring additional revenue to the city.

Early in his mayoral career, a brand-new playground opened at Wildwood Park, and there also have been other important things that have transformed Ottumwa over the last eight years: adding quiet zones for Burlington Northern Santa Fe trains through the city, and the \$5 million Streetscape project, which has given the city's downtown area a newer, fresher feel.

"Thank heaven nobody's been killed or injured, but that was a real challenge to get done," Lazio said of the quiet zones. "I think we now take it for granted, but I used to go downtown, and you could not carry on business when the whistles would blow because it was so noisy. Even at the courthouse, I was in a court case and the judge said that we were taking a recess until the train was through down.

"(The quiet zones) are something I feel good about. It was a major accomplishment and it's been good for the community."

Regarding Streetscape, it's been one of the crown jewels to Lazio's time in office.

"I'm so pleased about our downtown. It looks so much better than it did eight or nine years ago," he said. "I mean, I have some predecessors who did a fantastic job, but there's just no comparison. A picture is worth 1,000 words, but in this case, it may be more. People would drive by, and say, 'What's going on? It's almost like it's dying.'"

Lazio also was a driving force in recognizing Ottumwa's diversity. Last year the city's first Juneteenth celebration occurred, as well as Pride month, and he signed proclamations for both. The mayor said he's continuing what started before him, but there is a big opportunity to capitalize on diversity in the years to come.

"We have people from I think 39 different countries, and that's something we've got to deal with as we move forward," he said. "I think this new council will be really responsive to that, but it's going to take time because not everyone is at the same point. It's been a real growing experience and, I think, good for the city."

Two jobs in one

Arguably the toughest decision Lazio had to make as mayor was relieving Andy Morris as the city administrator in 2019, with Bob Jay later resigning as city finance director.

Lazio had to take over interim administrator duties to go along with his mayoral role as the patchwork city government carried on its business to the best of its ability.

"Relieving the person in charge of the day-to-day responsibilities was not a pleasant experience for me, but it had to be done for the good of the city," Lazio said. "And then we lost Bob Jay, and we went through a whole thing of finding another CFO. That's difficult because you've got to have someone with a financial background because fund accounting is different than what we do at home.

"Thank heaven I had a lot of good friends in city government," he said. "I remember spending time with the finance director in Des Moines, and he was very helpful to me because he'd been through things with small, medium and large cities, and he gave us some guideposts so we didn't stumble and fall."

Seeing the end

Lazio still has plenty of energy to carry on his duties, but said he'd been considering retirement since about midway through his current term. He will be giving way to Rick Johnson, someone he's known and respected for years.

"It's been about a two-year process of thinking it through and looking at it, and I just thought this was the right time for me personally," he said. "And my good wife has been so supportive and put up with a lot of weird hours and weekend commitments.

"If it was another two years I'd stay and do it, but I didn't want to make a four-year commitment. And you might say, 'Well, yeah, but you really got to recommend to the council to change it to a four-year term,' Lazio chuckled. "I think there is value in that, but you got to start when you're younger, and that's why I really encourage people to consider public service."

As for his immediate plans, Lazio and his wife will travel south to visit friends and family, and he has some hobbies to tend. However, he'll also attend council meetings among the gallery, "but not right away," he said.

"This is a part-time job and most people don't realize that," he said. "I'm here every day and I've enjoyed it. But it's time to do something else."

— Chad Drury can be reached at cdrury@ottumwacourier.com, and on Twitter @ChadDrury

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