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Argus-Courier Editorial

Kearney brings hope to council

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We applaud the City Council's decision to appoint Gabe Kearney to the vacant seventh council seat last week, ending a two-month stalemate over who was going to serve the remaining two years left on David Glass' term when he was elected mayor.

We hope Kearney's swearing in on Monday portends a new, more cooperative and collegial climate that will move the city forward in a positive direction.

It was not looking very positive at 11 p.m. on Feb. 28. After several rounds of straw votes over three meetings by the six-member council — during which no council member on either side of the 3-3 ideological divide would cross over and support a candidate favored by the other faction — Kearney finally emerged as a compromise candidate with longtime Councilmember Mike Healy demonstrating the leadership necessary by nominating him for the appointment.

At 29, Kearney is one of the youngest persons ever to serve on the City Council. In an interview this week, he impressed us as a bright individual who is eager to serve and willing to put in the extra time needed to get up to speed.

We feel that Kearney, an emergency preparedness coordinator with Kaiser Permanente, will bring a fresh perspective to the often fractious behavior of the council. He becomes the only current council member to live on Petaluma's east side and the first openly gay council member. He is also of Latino heritage, as his mother immigrated to the United States from Mexico.

He is not aligned with either faction on the council, and while he may be inexperienced in city government, he is well acquainted with the issues facing the city and has experience on a county advisory board that promotes economic revitalization and affordable housing. Moreover, at 29, he understands firsthand the challenges facing young people in our community who are struggling to find a job or buy a home.

Kearney told us that he understands the importance of compromising on certain issues for the good of the community. He also acknowledges and recognizes the importance of creating revenue for the cash-strapped city in order to preserve essential services. He understands very well that the city has for years lacked adequate retail shopping opportunities — from general merchandise to home improvement and home electronics — and that these holes in the city's business fabric force residents to leave town to buy needed products that results in fewer sales tax dollars for the city.

Two of the most important decisions the new council member will have to make in coming months will involve the city's worsening budget crisis and a proposal for a new Lowe's-anchored shopping center.

This week, Kearney and the rest of the council took the first step in dealing with the

budget problem, offering early retirement incentives to city employees. But without significant new revenue coming to the city in the next couple of years, tough decisions lie ahead that could result in fewer city jobs and reduced pay and benefits for the workers who remain.

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We commend the four council members who, on Feb. 28, stepped out of the box of their preferred candidates and threw their support to Kearney. Those four were Healy, Tiffany Renée, Chris Albertson and Mike Harris. Three of them (Healy, Renée and Harris) had taken time in late February to have coffee with Kearney and get to know him better. Meanwhile, Mayor David Glass and Councilmember Teresa Barrett stuck rigidly with their two preferred political candidates — Pamela Torliatt and Jason Davies — until joining in a final symbolic vote to make Kearney's approval unanimous.

Glass, unfortunately, blew the opportunity to demonstrate the leadership expected of the mayor to help break the deadlock over the appointment, and instead showed that politics was more important to him than finding compromise and doing the right thing for the community.

It was a similar case of skewed political priorities that led Glass to barge into a city employee's office a few months back, not to praise the employee for working on her day off, but to blast her and other city employees for daring to support someone other than himself in the November mayoral election.

As reported last week, Glass angrily confronted Assistant City Clerk Deborah Padovan and engaged in a regrettable tirade in which he blamed her for the election campaign not going well for him. City Hall was closed that day and Padovan was alone in her office when Glass showed up. Although he later apologized for his behavior after Padovan filed a harassment complaint, his actions were wholly inappropriate and reminded residents, as well as city employees, of his ongoing inability to control his temper and put city business ahead of politics.

With the appointment of Gabe Kearney, we hope the tone of city politics in Petaluma will improve and move past the all-too-familiar trend of anger and infighting that has undermined problem-solving and good governance. We wish Kearney success, and hope that as the City Council tackles some very difficult issues in the coming months, it can do so with a spirit of cooperation, respect and civility.