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Opinion

The progressive agenda on good government

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On the whole, San Francisco is a progressive city. San Franciscans generally believe it is important for government to provide health and social services, maintain parks, operate public transportation, deliver water, build and maintain public buildings, and supply fire and police services — to name only a few of the many services the City and County of San Francisco provides.

It is not enough for progressive San Franciscans to care about public services; we must insist that government actually deliver those services effectively.

It is time to define a progressive good-government agenda, one that believes both in the need to pay taxes and in the need for significant reforms of government that will enable it to make better use of those taxes.

Civil service systems were ahead of their time when they were invented in the late 19th century. The principle that applicants will be chosen and employees promoted based on their "merit" is one that, we hope, all employers — public and private — will seek to achieve. But, like many utopian ideas, implementing a true "merit system" is not as simple as it sounds. We have learned a lot about how to motivate good employees in the last hundred years. Little of this knowledge has been applied to The City's work rules.

We can preserve the values underlying our public human-resources systems while modernizing them to meet the operational needs of a large organization (and, at 27,000 employees, The City certainly qualifies). While there is no "silver bullet," the following would be steps in the right direction:

- n Recognize that the Department of Human Resources is unable to conduct testing for 1,200 job classes, and instead allow city departments to conduct their own testing.
- n Make job testing available any time a department needs to hire, rather than relying on "eligibility lists" that last two to four years and are not responsive to the rapid pace of the modern job market.
- n Invest much more in training for all employees.
- n Require regular job evaluations of all employees, including supervisors and managers.
- n Base promotions, at least in part, on job performance, rather than relying solely on seniority.
- n Put civil service rulemaking and collective bargaining under one roof to help better integrate the two systems, instead of the current arrangement where this authority is spread across two separate

agencies.

The goals of an effective organization and a positive work environment for city employees do not conflict — rather, they go hand in hand. It's time to rethink The City's human resource policies with the goal of providing the best public services possible, and restoring public trust in city government as a capable, effective organization.

In the short run, we hope the result of these reforms will be a high-performance, high-morale public sector workplace. We don't pretend to have all the solutions, but it's time for all of us who care about city government to engage in a discussion of the issues. In the long run, this is the only antidote to the public's growing cynicism about the ability of government to deliver.

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