

Skinner tapped as next Lenowisco leader

JODI DEAL / Staff Writer



The Lenowisco Planning District Commission Board of Directors voted unanimously Monday night to hire Wise County Administrator Glen “Skip” Skinner, left, to replace outgoing Lenowisco Executive Director Ron Flanary, right, when he retires this summer. (photo by Richard Jessee)

BIG STONE GAP — Glen “Skip” Skinner’s a big-picture kind of guy.

He likes listening, brainstorming, bouncing ideas off of other people and imagining what could be done to improve Southwest Virginia.

Those are skills that have served him well for the past four years while he’s been the Wise County administrator.

But Skinner, of Big Stone Gap, hopes his new job, executive director of the Lenowisco Planning District Commission, will allow him to use those skills even more.

Lenowisco’s board of directors, made up of officials from the municipalities it serves in Wise, Lee and Scott counties, along with the city of Norton, voted unanimously to hire Skinner on Monday night. He’ll take the agency’s helm August 1, succeeding Ron Flanary, who’s led Lenowisco since 1991.

Although the job is new to Skinner, the regional planning agency and what it does certainly aren’t. Flanary and then-executive director Bruce Robinette hired Skinner as a regional planner there in 1982, and he stayed on until he became county administrator in 2004.

In a Tuesday interview at Mountain Empire Community College’s Goodloe Center, Flanary said he didn’t have a hand in hiring Skinner for the upcoming position. The board’s executive committee advertised for the position, reviewed the five applications they received and interviewed two candidates. Flanary didn’t participate in that process.

But he’s pleased with how things turned out. Flanary says Skinner brings perspective, attitudes and experience to the job that Flanary didn’t have when he took the reins, which will both ease the transition to new leadership and keep the agency on its toes.

BOTH SIDES OF THE TABLE

Lenowisco’s primary “customer base” includes the governments of the counties and city it serves, Skinner explained Tuesday. The agency helps local governments plan and secure funding for water and sewer projects, economic

development efforts and related infrastructure work, transportation planning and community revitalization plans.

“The beauty of the planning district is that it’s designed to respond to whatever local needs are,” Skinner said.

After years of being the guy who gave local governments recommendations and helped them make all sorts of plans, Skinner decided in 1994 that he needed to see things from the other side. With Flanary and Robinette’s blessing, and a state attorney general’s opinion to assure it was legal, he successfully ran for Big Stone Gap town council, and became mayor there two years later.

Taking the job as county administrator was another way to gain that kind of “other side” experience. There was no guarantee he’d get Flanary’s job when Flanary retired, but Skinner says he was open with Wise County reps that he’d be seeking the position when it came available.

Serving as county administrator taught him a lot about dealing with personnel issues, Skinner says, but left him wanting more interaction with local communities.

That experience will help Skinner step into the leadership shoes at Lenowisco far easier than Flanary did, Flanary predicted, noting that his first two years on the job were spent trying to find his footing, much to his surprise.

“The staff’s always looking to you to make calls — you’re like the coach of the team. You’re the front-line person to deal with legislators. It’s not easy, but he’ll have an advantage. He was that guy in the county,” Flanary said.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Skinner’s excited to get started on his new job and start examining the planning district’s current state. Transitions are a great time to reassess organizations, he added.

“What could we do better? Do we change? Do we need to change?” Skinner asked excitedly.

That’s not to say there’s anything wrong with Lenowisco, Skinner was quick to point out. The commission has many successful projects under its belt and others, including a regional broadband initiative, well under way.

Actually, it was experience with broadband deployment that made Skinner stand out among other applicants for the position who had traditional planning experience, Flanary noted.

At least in the short term, the organization will have to deal with tighter purse strings as state budget cutbacks affect its funding, Flanary noted. But, he added, Lenowisco always keeps a solid cash reserve for lean times.

Flanary retires July 1, and Skinner starts Aug. 1. During the month of July, Deputy Director Duane Miller will serve as acting executive director.

Lenowisco board chairman and St. Paul Mayor Jack Kiser said in a Tuesday press release that the board of directors is pleased to have hired Skinner, noting that his “combination of experience, maturity” and previous experience as Lenowisco made him the best fit for the job.