

The city's facilitator

City Manager John McDonough turns mayor's, council's vision into services

By John Schaffner
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Recognizing that John F. McDonough is a former Marine is instantaneous. What takes another moment to understand is that the Sandy Springs city manager is still all-Marine.

It is the way he carries himself—straight and tall and confident—and the firm handshake, the look-you-straight-in-the-eye approach to carrying on a discussion. It is the sense that this is a man in control and command in carrying out the mission.

That mission for McDonough remains the same as when he first sat in the city manager's seat in Sandy Springs just a year ago:

"I take the strategic vision and goals of the mayor and city council and work with our employees and our partners at CH2M Hill to translate that into action on the ground and provide services," he states without a bit of hesitation. "I am responsible for the day-to-day operations

of the government. I am kind of the link between the elected officials and the citizens."

McDonough is one of the few direct employees of the city and he knows who he answers to in the chain of command. "I work for the mayor and the council and the people of Sandy Springs."

It is not difficult to see that his Marine Corps training has helped prepare this 42-year-old for this job—both as a commander and emotionally.

"I work for the mayor and the council and the people of Sandy Springs."

— John McDonough

of the Sixth Fleet with Marine expeditionary units—once in 1988 and again in 1990. He described it as "a great experience for a young guy."

When he got out of the Marines in 1990, he took a job as a pharmaceuticals sales rep-

After graduating from the Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1986, McDonough entered the Marine Corps. "I was a young lieutenant and had a chance to travel the world." He was in the 2nd Marine Division at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and deployed twice as part of the landing force



CHRISTOPHER NORTH

Sandy Springs City Manager John McDonough points to a map of the 26 capital improvement projects he is working on for the city.

resentative. Did the training and decided that was not the career he wanted to pursue. Instead, he went to graduate school at Indiana University and got a masters degree in public affairs.

That was not the start of his career in local government. That start actually came as an intern in high school in the Tax Assessors office in Randolph Township, New Jersey. He did that as part of a class and then got hired for a summer job as part of a reassessment project. "I very much enjoyed that," he recalled. When at the Citadel, he also did an internship with the city of Charleston.

McDonough muses, "We often ask ourselves

what do I want to do when I grow up. I like to work with people. I like to get things done."

He recalled he had the opportunity to talk to someone who had been a city manager for 30 years. "He said there is a real opportunity for young people to get into this profession. If you look at the demographics, it is usually older guys that are in the profession," he explained. "So, it made a lot of sense. It was a good opportunity."

He said that when he was in graduate school, he got an opportunity to do an internship with the City of South Bend, Indiana, working with community development

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Sandy Springs City Manager John McDonough (right) talks to Sandy Springs Clerk of the Court Tony Day, center, and Sandy Springs receptionist Kelly Adams.

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 on a core redevelopment project. "By that time I was hooked. I have basically been at it ever since."

When he finished grad school, he was "fortunate to get my first town manager job in the small town of Ridgeland, South Carolina" (off of I-95). From there he moved upstate to Gaffney, a city of 13,000-14,000 people. Gaffney has big outlet shops. While he was there he had the opportunity to work on that outlet development with the Cherokee County Development Board and the Gaffney Board of Public Works. "That was one of the big successes we had while I was there," states.

From there he moved to Albany, Georgia, where he was the assistant city manager for a couple of years, including during the flood of 1998, "which was very interesting. I was part of the whole process of the evacuation, then the assessments and ultimately trying to get people back into their homes."

From Albany he went to Beaufort, South Carolina, as the city manager and was there almost seven years. It was from Beaufort, that he got the opportunity to come to Sandy Springs.

McDonough went through the interview process in December of 2005. Council took action in January and he started work in February of 2006.

As city manager, he is one of a handful of actual city employees, if you don't count the police chief and his officers and fire chief and his firefighters, all of which do work directly for the city.

The other direct city employees include the City Clerk Christy Rowland, the Clerk of Court Tony Day and the city's Finance Director Steve Rhapson. Some of the employees that work for them are CH2M Hill employees.

"My focus is on the city of Sandy Springs,"

McDonough states.

"There is a process and the process is extremely important. The process starts with our citizens and our mayor and city council members," he explained. "We help put things into a framework for discussion. As city manager, my role really is as a facilitator. I try to facilitate that process."

"First and foremost as we approach any task, our focus is on customer service—put the customer first, whether it is that homeowner, business owner, or someone interacting with the city of Sandy Springs. It could be through our court system," he added. "Dramatic change from what you see in many governments today."

"From day one our focus has been on our call center and on our web site—the two entry points for almost anybody dealing with the city," he said. "Ninety-five percent of the people who are going to interact with the city are going to start through our call center or through our web site. We wanted to make sure we translated that vision our council had for customer service into quality responsiveness in those areas. We wanted them to be centers of excellence within our organization," he emphasized.

Back in Feb. of 06, he said the city has a community visioning session where it sought to determine what were the key issues in the community. That was followed by a council retreat, where they tried to pull together the feedback from the community. What fell out of that retreat, according to McDonough, were our top priorities.

"Public safety was clearly the most important. Make sure our streets are safe, our neighborhoods are safe, our police are proactive," he stated. "The second priority was transportation. What do we do about the gridlock? There are some things that can be done short

of massive road building programs. Our community expects some improvements," he explained. "The third priority was community development and protection of our neighborhoods through the planning and zoning process," he said.

"Public safety and protection of the neighborhoods that is really the council's credo going back to the first time that I interviewed with them," McDonough stated. "Those elements tied in with customer service, responsiveness, transparency and efficiency, that is really the vision."

He said this form of government has been tried in a couple of places, but not to the extent it has been in Sandy Springs. "What is most important is how it is working from the perspective of the citizens, the customers."

"All in all, the quality of the service has gone up significantly," he states. "Is everything perfect? Of course not. There is always another project. There is always an opportunity to improve a process to make things better. And that is what we are committed to."

The city manager concluded by saying, "Our mayor and council have been very good about recognizing that this is a start-up and we need some time to build that general platform. Remember, on December 1, 2005, we went from 0 to 50 at the stroke of midnight." **R**

John F. McDonough
 Sandy Springs City Manager

- **Born:** Portland, Maine
- **Resides:** East Cobb
- **Family:** Wife: Tippi, Three children: Haley and twin boys, Patrick and Blaine.
- **Education:** Graduated from the Citadel, Charleston, SC in 1986, Masters Degree in Public Affairs from Indiana University.
- **Hobbies:** Says you have to have free time to have hobbies. One hobby is the Marine Corps Reserves, in which he has been actively involved since leaving active duty in 1990. Likes to hike and bike with his kids, coach the children in their activities, whether it be basketball, T-ball. Likes to play golf (married into a golf family), plays tennis but not often.
- **Recent Book:** Gen. Tony Zini's book, Battle For Peace. It is on ideas of how to direct U.S. power in the future.

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SANDY SPRINGS GOVERNMENT CALENDAR

- Feb. 26: Comprehensive Plan citizen advisory committee — City Hall council chambers, 7 p.m.
- Feb. 27: Design review, regular meeting—City Hall council chambers, 9 a.m.
- Feb. 28: Comprehensive Plan impact fee, advisory committee—Administration boardroom, 3 p.m.
- Mar. 6: Regular meeting—City Hall, 7 p.m.
- Mar. 8: Regular meeting, zoning appeals—City Hall, 7 p.m.