

The Saratogian ([saratogian.com](http://www.saratogian.com)), Serving the Saratoga Springs, N.Y. region

The Saratogian endorses Scott Johnson for mayor

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Scott Johnson projects the cool confidence of someone who is smart, thoughtful, pragmatic, efficient and well-versed in the issues facing Saratoga Springs. He has earned the public's support, and The Saratogian's endorsement, for a second term as mayor.

Public Safety Commissioner Ron Kim gave up what would likely have been a safe seat on the City Council to run for mayor against Johnson. Why? In his endorsement interview, Kim said he decided to run for mayor in April when his colleagues voted down his No. 1 priority: a new public safety facility.

That misguided single-mindedness while the city is in a budget crisis, and the confrontational style Kim has demonstrated during his two terms on the council, are fatal flaws in his bid to become mayor. Saratoga Springs needs a consensus builder in the mayor's seat, and that is not Kim's strong suit.

The police department's current setup is, without question, inadequate for both the employees and the public. The city's failure, well before Kim was in office, to fix longstanding needs as seemingly simple as providing a locker room and bathroom for women officers resulted in a lawsuit and costly settlement. Over the last few years, the city and private developers have invested tens of thousands of dollars and countless hours in the pursuit of a new facility.

But the current economic climate calls for putting such a project on hold. The challenge is to improve the police department situation with the resources at hand, fixing structural deficiencies and pursuing options like moving public works' clerical staff to allow for public safety expansion on City Hall's lower level. This requires the council working together as a team, rather than each of the five advocating for the departments they represent. Johnson is more likely to accomplish that than Kim.

Enough about the public safety facility. Let's talk about the recreation facility under construction on the South Side Recreation field.

This project has been branded as Johnson's, but that's because he has been the force behind making the best of a not-so-great situation. The prior City Council, of which Kim was a member, voted to borrow money for the express purpose of building a recreation

facility. There are disputes about the exact amount of money the city would have thrown away by dropping the project, but the number is in the hundreds of thousands, if not more than a million. Johnson ended years of talk on the City Council about how Saratoga Springs should have an indoor recreation center. He took the bull by the horns and with the support of the rest of the council, he did something that is so difficult in this form of government: moved forward.

The money that was borrowed could be used only for a recreation facility. The site Johnson pursued is in a neighborhood that makes it accessible to hundreds of youngsters on foot or bicycle. The property is deeded only for recreational purposes, and the fields were among the city's most underused and neglected.

There are, however, concerns about Johnson.

The biggest disappointment of Johnson's first term in office is his failure to bring to a close contract negotiations with the unions representing a majority of city employees, including the police. He wasn't wrong to hire outside counsel, but the city doesn't have any progress to show for the time and money invested thus far. That said, Kim has been inappropriately uncooperative in refusing to share all the police rules and regulations with Johnson and the city's labor lawyers. And though Kim is proud to have negotiated the current firefighters' contract, which lowered the starting salary from \$40,000 to \$33,000, the savings are short-term, because the wages jump right back up in just four years, and long-term benefits are still more generous than the public can afford.

Granted, this isn't an easy situation. The biggest and fastest growing expense in the city budget is benefits for retired and current employees. It's an out-of-control cost and major issue at all levels and in all sectors of public employment. The public cannot afford to continue to carry contracts that allow employees to retire relatively young with generous pensions.

Yet there is little incentive for the unions in Saratoga Springs to settle contracts when the employees still receive automatic annual step raises and health insurance, with or without a new agreement. The only motivation would be to protect jobs. The proposed 2010 city budget, which currently includes layoffs as well as a property tax increase of close to, if not more than, 8 percent, won't be voted on by the City Council until after the Nov. 3 election.

Both candidates are lawyers who are used to having to do their homework, articulate ideas and make their case. Johnson demonstrates the cooler head in making — rather than arguing — his case, which is the way Saratoga Springs needs to be represented. Where improvement is needed: The full-time deputy must represent him, and the city as a whole, in the same tactful, diplomatic and professional manner that is expected of the mayor.

Political affiliations (Johnson is a Republican, Kim is a Democrat) matter little in this or

other local races. Personal style and Kim's tunnel vision about building a public safety facility make the choice clear: Re-elect Scott Johnson.