

Mayor Johnson's absences from council meetings attracts attention

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As the Sacramento City Council began its Oct. 11 meeting, Mayor Kevin Johnson was nowhere to be found. The mayor, his staff said, was attending to personal matters.

Until that night, the mayor's absences at previous council meetings had gone mostly unnoticed. But this absence – his eighth of the year and second in a row – created a stir. Some council members and city officials privately wondered where Johnson was, given that he had been in City Hall earlier in the day.

Johnson has been absent for nearly one out of every five meetings this year, a rate unmatched at City Hall going back at least a decade, according to a Bee review of minutes for more than 520 City Council meetings. His eight skipped meetings equal the most for an elected official for any year dating back to 2001.

While many of the meetings Johnson missed dealt with routine city matters, he was absent for a critical discussion on police officer layoffs in May and a council vote last month to not allow an additional poker card room license in the city.

In addition to the eight council meetings, Johnson has also missed three council special workshops this year. Those sessions dealt with the future of the Sacramento Zoo, the city's long-term budget outlook and the placement of fluoride in the city's drinking water supply.

Since taking office in December 2008, Johnson has been absent from council meetings 16 times, records show.

The mayor's office did not make Johnson available for comment.

"Mayor Johnson has never missed a crucial vote, and he once actually left a meeting with the president of the United States so he could return to Sacramento for a council meeting," said the mayor's spokesman, Joaquin McPeck.

"There has never been a mayor in the history of Sacramento who has worked harder at the highest levels and covered more ground – paying his own expenses along the way – on behalf of his city."

Steve Maviglio, a spokesman for the mayor's re-election campaign, also defended Johnson's record.

"Kevin Johnson puts more energy, time and enthusiasm into the mayor's job in a week than his predecessor did in a year," Maviglio said. "There's a lot more to being an activist mayor than banging a gavel at a dull City Council meeting where minutia is discussed."

Johnson isn't the first City Hall official with a less-than-perfect attendance record. Former Mayor Heather Fargo was criticized for missing meetings during her second mayoral term.

Fargo missed more than a dozen meetings in her second term because she was attending climate-change conferences around the world – a record Johnson made note of during a mayoral candidates debate with Fargo in 2008.

In her eight years as mayor, Fargo missed a total of 33 meetings, roughly one out of every 12 meetings on her watch, The Bee's review found. She missed eight in 2006 and was absent for seven meetings in two other years, records show.

On the road again

That's far from a record. Go back a few decades, and former Councilman John Roberts missed 21 out of 78 regular and special council meetings in 1980, according to a Bee report. Two other council members missed at least 10 meetings that year as well.

Former Mayor Anne Rudin, who rarely missed meetings in her more than 20 years as an elected officeholder, said there is value in having a consistent presence at City Hall.

"People like to know that the mayor is on the job," she said. "While they know you're going to have to be away from City Hall for meetings elsewhere, City Hall is the mayor's home base."

Like Fargo, out-of-town travel has led Johnson to miss many meetings.

In February, he missed a meeting to attend a movie screening at the White House. Two months later, he was the featured speaker at an event at the Harvard Business School.

Other trips have taken him to the United Nations and to New Orleans. Twice, he was absent for "personal matters," according to his office.

On two occasions, the mayor has missed council sessions attending to business that his aides said was related to the city's ongoing efforts to build a new sports and entertainment arena downtown.

On May 17, for instance, the mayor was the Sacramento Kings' representative at the National Basketball Association draft lottery in New Jersey. That same night, back in Sacramento, an estimated 300 police officers packed City Hall for a tense council meeting during which police layoffs were debated for the first time in recent history.

Johnson would be in attendance at the council meeting in June when the final vote was made to go through with the cop layoffs – a move that the mayor voted against.

Personal matters

An absence more directly related to the arena effort came on June 2, when the mayor was in Los Angeles to meet with Anschutz Entertainment Group, an arena operator that Sacramento officials are courting to help finance the downtown sports facility. That night, the council heard an hourlong report on the city's "long-range structural imbalance," which is blamed for causing persistent budget deficits.

Gary Dietrich, a nonpartisan political analyst and president of Citizen Voice, a Sacramento voter-education group, said voters might be willing to give the mayor a pass on his absences if the city is successful in building a new arena.

"The biggest single thing on everybody's agenda is that arena," Dietrich said. "Love it or hate it, that is job one. And if he lands this thing, it becomes the cornerstone of his mayoral career."

Sometimes, though, it is unclear why the mayor is absent. On Oct. 11, while he was attending to undisclosed personal matters, members of the Occupy Sacramento movement showed up at City Hall for the first time. It was the beginning of an ongoing struggle between city officials and protesters demanding to remain in downtown's Cesar Chavez Park 24 hours a day.

Some of Johnson's colleagues on the council have near-impeccable attendance records. The eight members of the council have combined to miss 12 meetings this year, with most missing only one or two sessions.

Councilwoman Sandy Sheedy, who has missed 11 meetings over the past 10 years and just one this year, said, "My personal view of my job is that at a minimum, I need to show up at the meetings."

"I'm here because the voters wanted me to be here and they wanted me to make decisions," she said. "I don't know what (Johnson's) ideas are of his job. Maybe it's completely different than mine."

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