

Magazine honors a Ventura leader

City Manager Rick Cole named one of public officials of the year

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A Washington, D.C.-based magazine has named Ventura City Manager Rick Cole one of its public officials of the year, further cementing his reputation as an advocate for smart growth and urban redevelopment.

Governing Magazine, a monthly publication whose primary audience is state and local government policymakers and managers, considered thousands of public officials across the nation for the honor.

It recognized Cole, 53, for excelling in both elected and appointed roles over the past decade and promoting innovative mixed-use development that reflects community values and participation.

"It's pretty hard to find someone who has accomplished as much as he has," Alan Ehrenhalt, the magazine's executive editor, said Monday. "He's done remarkable things in two cities already, first from an elected position and then as an appointed body. You don't find too many making that transition."

This year's winners also include Mississippi's governor; the president of the New Jersey Senate; the mayor of Nashville, Tenn.; a Chicago library director; and the Bush administration's homelessness czar. The group will be recognized in a Washington ceremony Nov. 15.

Cole first gained recognition as a mayor and city councilman in Pasadena in the 1980s and '90s. He helped revive the aging Old Town business district and got competing groups to plot a long-term strategy for growth.

As city manager in Azusa for six years, Cole helped lure new investment to the fading blue-collar city.

Cole now is working on a master plan for Ventura as he and the City Council promote smart growth — the clustering of homes, shops and offices in pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods.

"What he did in Pasadena — providing leadership to transform a failed downtown mall into a thriving core — had a big impact nationwide and throughout California," said John Norquist, a former mayor of Milwaukee who is now chief executive officer and president of the Congress for New Urbanism.

Larry Wilson, now editor at the Pasadena Star-News, has known Cole since the two helped start a newspaper together, the Pasadena Weekly, 25 years ago.

"The thing about Rick that everyone in town came to recognize — including those who were predisposed not to like him from his student activist days — is that he's not only usually the smartest guy in the room," Wilson said in an e-mail Monday. "He's the guy ... who can take a notion that might seem dull to some — New Urbanism, smart growth — and make it sound as sexy as Sophia Loren."

Cole said Monday that a city should be measured by building modest successes over a sustained period of time.

"You do great work by pushing the entire team and the cause forward," he said. "I hope the attention that comes from this will allow us to continue to emphasize what we have been promoting the last couple of years: that smart growth, civic engagement and accountable government go together."

The Columbia University graduate also is not one to mince words, others say.

"He doesn't make it any secret what his position is," said Carolyn Briggs, chairwoman of the Ventura Planning Commission.

Ventura's effort to switch from a traditional zoning code to a new system has touched a few nerves, but Cole deserves high marks for his diplomatic skills and focus, she said.

"The community is in an in-between place," Briggs said. "We're in the throes of transition, and it is painful."

Ehrenhalt said Cole and Ventura are being watched. "He's been at the forefront of the whole smart growth movement, and people around the country look to him," Ehrenhalt said.



