



After 40 years as a public servant in the city, Jim Cowdell will retire as executive director of EDIC/Lynn as of June 1. (Spenser Hasak)

EDIC's Cowdell calls it a career

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For Jim Cowdell, it was three strikes, and he's out.

After 40 years as a public servant in the city, Cowdell will retire as executive director of EDIC/Lynn as of June 1. He announced his decision to the board of directors in a Tuesday morning meeting.

“I've been with the city 40 years, and it's just time,” Cowdell said. “It's time. I still have 3½ years on my contract, so this is my decision. It's just time to relax, breathe, golf, walk my dog, enjoy life, spend time with the family, travel.”



Cowdell, who has led EDIC for 20 years after serving on the City Council for two decades, came to the decision to retire after a serious discussion with his family – wife, Julie, and sons, Tim and Jimmy – that took place after he underwent treatment in January for a third type of cancer.

“In the last five years, I’ve had three different types of cancers,” he said, listing them in chronological order.

“Five years ago, I was diagnosed with neuroendocrine cancer,” he said. “It’s one of the rarest cancers. Steve Jobs died from it. Aretha Franklin died from it. It can be anywhere in your body. Mine was in my intestines. I had emergency surgery, and they removed half of my intestines. So far it has not come back.”

Three years ago, Cowdell was diagnosed with cutaneous lymphoma, a rare form of non-Hodgkin lymphoma that affects only 3,000 to 3,500 people in the U.S. annually. He spent a month receiving radiation treatment at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston.

Last December, Cowdell hit a trifecta he would have preferred not to cash when he got prostate cancer. That led to an aggressive round of radiation treatment – 30 consecutive days – that proved to be both effective and thought-provoking.

“It appears that they also got that,” he said. “But once I went through that, it makes you take a step back. You don’t know how many years you have left, and you think about what you want to do with the rest of your life.”

Cowdell has clarity on that, despite loving his job and compiling an impressive track record of achievements.

“Jim Cowdell’s time with EDIC has been defined by exceptional leadership,” said Mayor Jared C. Nicholson. “As a tireless advocate for our business community and a dedicated public servant, his impact on the City is immeasurable. While his presence will be sorely missed, we wish him a happy, well-deserved retirement.”

Cowdell made his final decision after several conversations with EDIC Board Chair Charles Gaeta, who is also a good friend.



“Jim is comfortable with his decision, and I’m extremely comfortable with it,” Gaeta said. “He has been tremendous to work with for many years and has always put the interests of the city first. I’m happy that he is doing this for himself and his family. He deserves it.”

Cowdell, 64, is a lifelong Lynner and Classical Hall of Famer. He earned an undergraduate degree and an MBA from Endicott College, taking classes at night for a total of 11 years while working full-time.

After getting laid off from General Electric in 1987, he decided to run for city council and was elected as the Ward 5 councilor at the age of 25. He served in that role for 20 years, including 10 as council president.

“I never wanted to run for councilor at large,” said Cowdell, who ran unsuccessfully for mayor against Patrick McManus in 1995. “I think I went to the Ray Flynn School of government, which is answering your phone, having neighborhood meetings, and representing your constituents. As council president, I was able to pass some larger initiatives, like the rezoning of the downtown (in 2003). That has led to more than 1,000 people now living in the downtown. I think that’s a good thing.”

Cowdell had been working at the human services agency Bridgewell for 15 years and was chief operating officer in 2006 when Mayor Edward “Chip” Clancy Jr. asked him to take over leadership of EDIC. Clancy was the first of four mayors he has worked for while compiling the longest tenure of any EDIC executive director ever in Lynn.

“I’m proud I have been able to work with four mayors (Clancy, Judith Flanagan Kennedy, Thomas McGee, and Nicholson) and I became a close confidante of all of them,” said Cowdell, who cites his agency’s response to the pandemic as one of his proudest accomplishments.

“That was the worst thing to hit the business community in my lifetime,” he said. “EDIC never shut down one day throughout COVID. We gave out hundreds of grants to businesses. I’m really proud of my staff for that.”

EDIC buying the building at 225 Boston St., so the Veterans Administration medical clinic could stay in the city, is another highlight, along with the redevelopment of the waterfront, the opening of Market Basket in West Lynn, and convincing Kettle Cuisine to move its operation here from Chelsea.



In Cowdell's tenure, EDIC has provided businesses with almost \$20 million in loans and awarded \$9 million in grants during COVID, leading to almost 2,000 jobs created in 20 years.

“Kettle Cuisine was looking to expand. They brought 100 jobs to Lynn, and today there are more than 500 jobs there, and they are mostly Lynn people,” said Cowdell, a former director of the Lynn Parks Softball Association. “I sold him on Lynn, and he ended up here. If I can't sell Lynn, a Lynn guy born and raised here, then I shouldn't be sitting here. But I was able to convince him that Lynn was a good place for his employees to work and live.”

Market Basket has approximately 300 employees, the majority of whom live in the city. “That was a big deal, getting Market Basket. Place is packed all the time.”

Cowdell said in his first EDIC board meeting in 2006, he told them he wanted to focus on the waterfront. Two decades later, power lines have been relocated, the MBTA ferry is a smash success, and there are major housing and retail developments either built or planned at both ends.

“We are seeing development happen, and I'm proud of the role EDIC has played,” he said.

He can also feel good about giving the city – his city – his best effort for the last four decades. And he will never stop rooting for Lynn.

“I'll be cheering from the sidelines,” he said.

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