

## Our City

Beyond normal routines within all the city departments, things are pretty quiet as I look towards the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend. A few personnel are on vacation with family; which is what most folks find time to do in the summer months, especially around the 4<sup>th</sup>. Sunday July 10<sup>th</sup> won't be routine and I am asking you to help things go smoothly.

You will recall that two Fridays ago the City crews and County Highway District worked cooperatively to chip many of our major streets in town. As I wrote last week, Sunday July 10<sup>th</sup> those same crews will be sealing the chips with an oil mixture. Sunday was selected to help minimize inconvenience; but undoubtedly some will still occur as this process will take longer. Once applied to the chips the oil will take at least one to two hours to dry before it can be driven on. To those of you who attend services at the LDS Church on Pocatello and the Assembly of God Church on Harrison, we apologize for the inconvenience that I know you will experience. We will do our best to minimize it. Unlike the chipping process on some streets, where only the traffic lanes were affected, like to the 200 block of Idaho Street, the seal process will be from curb to curb on all the streets that were chipped. To those who own property along these streets, again please park your vehicles somewhere else on Sunday July 10<sup>th</sup>. For those who park in a driveway or a garage but need to access one of the streets in question I would suggest you park in an alternate place if you will be needing to use your car during the sealing process. I know it's a hassle, but I don't know how to minimize it any more. Thank you again for your understanding and cooperation.

As I look forward to tomorrow's budget meeting on July 1, I can report that things are going fairly smoothly despite minimal increases in revenues. But, because of those minimal revenues, decisions have to be made and those decisions affect you directly. Like most public entities much of the City of American Falls' budget is spent on personnel; personnel that do their very best day in and day out for you, the citizens of our community. The rest frankly is spent on trying to maintain what we have. Big projects like the Waste Water Treatment Plant, the new waterline from the springs and new storage tank along with the downtown revitalization project don't happen routinely in small towns, the revenue base just isn't there. Those types of projects require grants, bonds, and long term-savings on the part of the City. You have probably figured out by now that I do not do well just trying to maintain the status quo. But, as we look forward to trying to maintain what we have, just doing the maintenance comes with a price as will the option of doing nothing. So, as the superintendents, Clerk Herndon, the City Attorney, the City Council and I have worked through the budget, I have tried to balance being progressive against simply maintaining the status quo. I believe we found a balance as we have worked through the process. Allow me to explain.

Personnel are costly. At least if you want to keep the ones that do their very best day in and day out. Prior to a few years ago the City of American Falls was a training ground and revolving door as we would hire employees, train them with a specific skill set, and then they would move on to better paying positions. The cost of training a new employee is not cheap monetarily or time wise. Most businesses consider it an investment; but is only an investment if you can pay the employee enough to keep them from moving. So, three years ago we started to move our pay scale to a more competitive level. Doing nothing would have left us with very

few employees and you without the most basic services currently provided, it was getting that bad. Making our pay scale at least somewhat competitive was not an option in my opinion. Most departments have managed to budget flat. But, the problem with doing that is that costs for maintenance on property or equipment never remain flat, they always manage to go up. The other problem is that new equipment can hardly ever be purchased outright especially when you are talking about mowers, cars, trucks, water wells, water pipe, sewer systems, storm drains, streets, signs, police protection gear, recreational equipment for our youth programs and so many other things. It all wears out and it all goes up in price to fix or replace. So when our superintendents are able to budget flat and still provide the current level of service and maintenance, it makes me damn proud of each of them because they are maximizing every dollar they receive from you in revenue.

That being said, I believe there are two places where a flat budget would not be in your best interests. A few years ago the Sanitation Department had saved enough money in their Capital Improvement fund to buy a new garbage truck. When I buy lemons, I go to Ken's; I don't special order them from the grower or manufacturer. In this case, like we did the new garbage truck, but that is exactly what we got. I bought a car years ago that turned out to be a lemon, there was no way to turn it into lemonade, regardless of how much money I threw at it. Our new sanitation is a lemon! Sorry, there is no way to sugarcoat it.

We, the citizens of American Falls, have invested \$15,000,000 into our new waste water treatment plant. And, while it is new, most of it will be going out of warranty during the next budget year and ongoing maintenance will be needed to protect this major investment. The current Waste Water budget does not provide enough funding for adequate maintenance to this facility. In my mind there is little choice.

At the budget meeting on June 28<sup>th</sup>, I recommended to the City Council two increases in assessed fees that, if adopted, would provide for the eventual replacement of the garbage truck and provide an adequate maintenance budget at the Waste Water Treatment Plant. The increases that I recommended were 25 cents and \$1.00 respectively. I won't make the promise of George H. Bush going forward, but I believe the proposed \$1.25 and our City crews' ability to do so much with what they have, future increases should be minimal in comparison. You may recall back to 2006 as we contemplated and voted on the bond that allowed us to replace the Sunbeam Spring line, build a new storage reservoir, replace critical water lines around the hospital, install a booster station to meet fire flow requirements and build the new waste water treatment plant fees for Water, Waste Water and Sanitation were expected to be well over \$100 per month. No, the \$1.25 increase is not insignificant, but it is a far cry from where it was predicted to be.

The increase may not sit well with some of you if the City Council ultimately decides to include it in next year's budget. I can understand that sentiment too, as I know most everyone's personal budget is just as tight or tighter than the City's. However, I will not accept the consequences of not trying to maintain the investments so many have worked so hard to secure. Although I will be gone two weeks in July, I will make myself available if you would like to discuss anything. Whatever I can do to smooth the way forward, I am open to.

Until next week...