

Our City

As I sat through another grant planning meeting last Tuesday I did my best to focus on the topic at hand, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for Roosevelt and Gifford Streets and associated subsurface infrastructure; but my mind kept scrolling over the laundry list of concerns associated with most grants. In the end any grant can be distilled down to the availability of money and an associated need for municipal improvement. Thanks to the efforts of our former Mayor Amy Manning and Public Works Coordinator Jeremy Peirsol, the last ten years have seen a multitude of improvements throughout our community, largely due to grants. I am not diminishing the efforts of other City personnel, our primary engineering partners at JUB and Keller, the City Council or me, but most of the original heavy lifting was done by Mayor Manning, and Jeremy has done a superb job of continuing the lift on behalf of the City. My mind scrolled through the list as I stared across the table at Jeremy, knowing he had but ten days left with the City of American Falls before he completed his move to Boise to be with his wife as she begins her new position with the USDA. I find myself torn in so many directions as I know the best path forward, based on Amy's example and my years of experience, but I find difficulty in piecing it all together.

As I began to refocus on the task at hand, the City's ability to meet the cash match that would allow us to be successful in receiving the CDBG grant became paramount. With most grants a cash match from the City is required. Some grants allow for an in-kind match such as the cash equivalent of City labor, equipment and materials. And still others allow for both; which is the case with the CDBG grant. The problem with the CDBG grant is a match amount is not specified but grants are typically awarded up to \$500,000 for those municipalities that ante up the most cash towards the specified project. As we hashed through the details of the proposed project, we came to the consensus that we would need to contribute about \$136,000 in cash to a project that will roughly cost \$806,000. The \$806K also includes the value of the City's in-kind match and a potential \$100,000 from the Local Rural Highway Investment Program (LRHIP), a street grant requiring no match.

A lot of pieces and parts have to come together to fix the streets and sidewalks, water lines and storm drains from the library to the hospital. You only have to look at Hospital Hill to know that the street is in dire need. Underneath the deteriorating asphalt you would find water lines that no longer meet fire suppression flow requirements and a storm water system that currently diverts all storm water from the area up and around the hospital clear over to Fort Hall and Van Buren; the site of significant flooding anytime we get a heavy sustained rain. The project needs to be done. Yet, there is an ill-defined line between being progressive and being practical.

That line blurs when an obvious need limits our ability to properly maintain what we have. A case in point would be the much needed downtown revitalization project. The cash match for that project hindered our ability to maintain other streets and water services for nearly four years. It is a tradeoff and one that takes thoughtful deliberation to find the best overall outcome for the City. I will always strive to be progressive in our attempts to make American Falls better. I have been fortunate to have worked with superintendents and City Councils who have similar visions and philosophies. Through your input as a community I believe we have collectively done the very best possible for our City.

As the numbers for the CDBG grant scrolled through my head I struggled with the reality that Jeremy wouldn't be here to complete his efforts. The lift he has given our community will be over in a few days, but his efforts will endure for most of our lives. Without question he has made American Falls a better place to live, work, and raise a family.

I hear all the time that no one is irreplaceable. As I struggle with what to do moving forward without Jeremy I am not sure that is true; and the same applies to our other superintendents. They each contribute uniquely and it is that uniqueness that has made American Falls better. Jeremy's position as a Public Works Coordinator has been open for applications now for over three weeks, yet only one letter of interest has been received. I will be meeting with that person on Tuesday to determine if there is a potential fit for the City. If there is, then a formal interview will be set up. If not, the search for a solution will continue.

Sure, pieces and parts of Jeremy's position can be assumed by other superintendents and personnel; it is how we operated for most of the last ten years. But Jeremy's ability to work across departments and coordinate his grant writing efforts to meet the needs of multiple interests within the City and other entities will be exceedingly difficult to replicate. And, that prospect leaves me torn as I know the best path forward if the initial meeting with the position applicant on Tuesday does not pan out and my plan B fails as well. My plan B would be to reassume the oversight of the coordination between the various City Departments and try to contract for a grant writer. The problem with plan B is that the grant writer would likely have no working knowledge of the City and the needs of our various departments; so their ability to look for and coordinate grants benefiting multiple departments, like the CDBG grant above, would be difficult.

Plan C has me the most torn; because I would assume all the responsibilities much like Mayor Manning did in her efforts to get the Water and Waste Water bonds passed; like her efforts that went above and beyond the norm to garner success in securing grants to revitalize our downtown. The hours Amy dedicated to those efforts were staggering. They are hours I currently struggle to find available. So I remain torn as to what is best for the City should current plans fall short.

As the next weeks and months come and go, with some planning and luck solutions will be found. All of this might all seem a bit dramatic and perhaps it is. It may be easy for some to say, "What difference will any of the above decisions really make; or, in a hundred years who will know or for that matter care." The simple answer is I care and I believe most of you do as well. I believe the decisions we make that affect the lives of others either today, tomorrow or further in the future always matter. Those decisions should always be the very best we are capable of making.

Until next week...