

Our City

It's all a bit piecemeal to me. I am pleased that we have been able to do it but it is piecemeal nonetheless and I am not sure it is sustainable as the pie is only so big and other sources are often hit or miss. It has City employees frustrated and your City Council and I more than a little concerned.

If you had the opportunity to drive by the City's Street Shop on Whitman last week you could have seen three of our police cars parked in front; no they weren't there to share coffee and donuts on their break. They were there for what is frequently becoming more repairs. Every police vehicle purchased by the City in the 12 years I have been associated with it have been bought used, most with already high mileage. Recently, one broke down on its way to an emergency response. As my grandmother would have said, "the cupboard is bare."

Five and a half years ago the beginning wage at the City was just above minimum and we could not keep a good employee. Now that rate is nearly doubled and we are somewhat competitive especially when benefits are included, but still we have personnel move to greener pastures. In raising wages so we could provide needed services funding for equipment and regular operations and maintenance went lacking. It is a Catch 22, a no win. We have been able to gain some new equipment in our three enterprise departments, those we assess a fee for, because we have been able to plan for and save for them. In our other departments we do not have that advantage; what new equipment we have obtained has been done through lease-purchase agreements where annual payments are more easily budgeted for over a period of three to six years. We have reached the limits of that option as well in all departments. The cupboard is indeed bare. Case in point, the three dilapidated police cars in front of the shop.

The silver lining in this instance is once again a onetime fix. Thankfully a year ago you chose to pass two bonds, one for a new intermediate school and one for the renovation of our hospital. The buildings require City building permits which generate revenue. I will be recommending to the City Council that much of those funds be used to purchase outright three new police cars and replace the rattletrap that our Building Administrator has to drive with something a bit newer. It's a one-time fix and again not sustainable. The sustainable alternative is annexation, increase the City's tax base. Even the preparation to annex will likely have us taking from Peter to pay Paul, but I see no alternative if as a City we are to continue to serve the citizens of American Falls in a responsible manner.

Almost worse yet, I wasn't sure that was possible until yesterday, is the state of the equipment our volunteer firefighters are required to wear and depend on. Our volunteer fire department is what keeps your homeowners and property insurance rates lower than they would be otherwise. By my rough calculations it costs about \$10,000 to properly equip one firefighter, no that doesn't include the truck and hoses. Our SCBAs, self-contained breathing apparatus, alone cost \$7,200 per unit; each fire fighter has to have one. Ours expire in December, we need ten. Fire Chief Pete Williams has written grants for the past three years trying to get the SCBAs replaced before they are no longer safe to use, but he has had no luck. I have found no silver lining here. The viable solution was given yesterday, last Friday, by Councilman Workman in a meeting with Chief Williams and Clerk Herndon, it will work, but it will require your help and vote. We are to the point that a separate City/Rural Fire Taxing District

may be our only solution to the long-term funding problem, but even that won't help with the problem of the soon to be retired SCBAs. I have made calls and sent emails to those more closely associated with the FEMA grant process that Chief Williams has repeatedly applied to in hopes of tipping the scales our way and will work to that end until a decision one way or the other is made.

Some would say, just take money from someplace else, another department. My response would be, "Which services don't you want or think we need as a community that for the first time in decades is showing signs of growth?" There are no easy fixes; I can tell you that from my perspective they have all been used.

As I prefer to end on a brighter note here are two. Jason Behrend, the General Manager at Stotz Equipment, was at last Wednesday's Council meeting requesting a water service for their addition. At the conclusion of his request as we were talking he stated that since he has been here Stotz has hired ten new technicians and they plan on hiring four a year for the foreseeable future, the average new technician earns about \$70,000 a year. The better news is they prefer to "Grow Their Own" as they hire high school students who have shown an aptitude and are dependable, plus they have often paid for their employee's/student's education as they continue to work for the company. The second bit of good news is that the Chamber of Commerce, Idaho Power, Tammy Ramsey and her troop of volunteers, and the City are partnering to get power to the American Falls MIP Bandstand and further throughout South City Park.

Both of the above examples are reasons why to me even when things appear to be difficult to the point where no solution seems good American Falls is still the best place to live. We have an amazing community which even in challenging times finds folks coming together for a more common good.

Unit next week...