

# Local

## What it's like to be a ... City Manager

With college students choosing majors and high school students deciding between college or the workforce, this series will highlight one career path each week in August and September.

This week, we introduce you to **Mike Kee**, Manager for the City of Baker City. Kee grew up in Baker City and is a 1976 Baker High School Graduate.

BY GINA K. SWARTZ  
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**The BCP:** What is your background?

**Mike:** In 1981, I started work as a Deputy Sheriff. Then, a couple years later, I went to work for the Police Department in Ontario and kinda worked my way up through the ranks, eventually becoming the Chief. I was Chief for 8-9 years.

**The BCP:** How long have you filled this role and what was it like when you first took over?

**Mike:** I've been here for let's see—it will be five years in September. Taking over, there was a lot to muddle through.

As a city government, a lot of the organizations we worked with looked at us with trepidation, just because of the lack of continuity with all the staff we had been through. Now we have a really good close working relationship with ODOT. We have to—they are a huge funding source for us, but when I first came here, we didn't. Some of the local organizations had been burnt by the City; we had a bad reputation. Just overall a lot of people in town I talked to weren't happy with the lack of consistency.

Unfortunately, that is one of the things that happens when you're cycling through administration. I kind of concentrated on that when I was trying to convince the Council to hire me. There were definitely smarter people they could hire, people with more education or with more experience, but they wouldn't find somebody who would try as hard as I would and be as honest as I am.

They'd had an incident several years before with the city manager where community perception was that he wasn't treating people very well. I assured them they wouldn't have that problem with me and I would stay around at least long enough to kind of get things stabilized and I think I've done that.

**The BCP:** So does that mean you may have plans to retire?

**Mike:** Plans. (He said laughing without giving any hints as to when that might be.)

**The BCP:** Tell me how a typical day starts for you and how it flows

**Mike:** I get here between 7:00 and 7:30 in the morning. It's really quiet and I would guess I get more done in that time than I do the rest of the day.

I have my day mapped out, but it usually only lasts until about 9:00. You can bank on it that there is

going to be a phone call or a department head come in, and you're off on something totally unexpected.

That is the really fun part of this job—you never know what's going to happen next.

The day is composed mostly of talking to citizens. Talking with department heads. I have very little interaction with, like say, the guy out there filling potholes except just in passing. I deal directly with the department heads and have a lot of citizen contact.

Council contacts me with a lot of citizen concerns. You know, they may get hit up at the grocery store with maybe a complaint or concern, and I should be the guy that they come to and find out what the story is. There are always two sides to the story, which is something I found out as a police officer. And usually the first story isn't completely accurate. But hopefully we can get to the bottom of it and that Councilor can get back to them. We really owe them that.

**The BCP:** What skills, qualifications or education do you need?

**Mike:** Well, Baker City was kind of in a bad place when they hired me. They'd been through kind of a progression of city managers at the time, and the interim had let them know that he was not going to be around long. They weren't actively recruiting or maybe they had just started. I had a friend here and at one point maybe late 90s early 2000s. I applied for the Police Chief here and was offered the position, but at the time it didn't work out for me. People knew I had an interest in coming back to Baker.

The Council at that time was kind of a different Council and I'm sure they were looking for somebody that had some management experience and could do a budget. I really touted my people skills and the fact that I was able to get along with people, and although everyone may not always agree with me, including the Council, I would take the time to explain why I believed what I did.

I have degree in law enforcement. I've had lots of management training and have training from an FBI command school. So I had a lot of management certificates and a management certification through Department of Public Safety Standards and Training. The education didn't seem as important to them.

There are people that go to school to be a city manager; they usually have a Master's Degree in public administration and of course I don't have that. It didn't seem as important to them as the experience. Maybe a combination of that and a little education.

**The BCP:** What would you say are your primary job duties?

**Mike:** Well first and foremost, I answer to City Council, the body not just one City Councilor. Sometimes they forget that they are a body and for example I'll get an order from one of them and often



Gina K. Swartz / The Baker County Press

Baker City Manager Mike Kee in his office at City Hall.

times have to remind them that we are a team. If it's something easy I'll just take care of it but with some of the requests I've gotten we have to get a majority of the Council to agree with—especially if it is spending money or something like that. I work closely with HBC, the Chamber, those types of organizations.

We are a small community and we do touch each other so it goes back to having good relationships even though personalities may not always agree in a small community like this, you have to have relationships where you can get things done for the best interest of the community.

You can't let petty little arguments and fights stand in the way of that.

**The BCP:** What about boards and commissions?

**Mike:** Council appoints all the commissions and boards so all of them answer to the council.

There may be times where we appoint temporary task forces and I may run them and compile the information for the Council, but in the end the only reason is for the Council to get that information, They are the overseer of all of the commissions and boards. I am a member by ordinance so I help with the minutes and stuff like that. The chairman of those boards pull more weight than I do. Each commission has a city staff liaison.

**The BCP:** What advice would you give to for anyone looking at this career path?

**Mike:** Well, there are a lot of people that want to go down this path as a career and what they need to do is get the education. Even in Oregon the majority of city managers have Master's Degrees in public education or business that gives them the real strong background in finances and managing people. Experience is every bit as important I think. What I've seen a lot of young people doing is going out and finding an internship where they work in a city and shadow the administrator and maybe even do some projects. I have seen a lot of people, I mean a lot, doing this. That would be the best way to do it. Now the smaller the city, the less they're going to require. I've seen a lot of these small cities where a manager is what they are mainly interested in and they don't need quite the budgeting background. I think it depends on the size of the city. All of that is of course going to determine what you might get paid.

## Housing relief available for wildfire losses

Margaret Davidson, Executive Director of Community Connection in La Grande, reminds, "During this last legislative session OHCS received funding to administer a newly created Wildfire Damage Housing Relief Account (WDHRA). This account was created by the passage of HB 3148 and authorizes the department to provide financial assistance to very low income (75% of FPL) homeowners who have experienced the loss of their primary residence due to a wildfire. Unfortunately, many fellow Oregonians have experienced such a loss in the last few weeks and more are at risk of losing their homes."

She added, "We are requesting help in sharing the information about the fund with your community members as they are or become victim to a wildfire(s). The information will also be on our website at <http://www.oregon.gov/ohcs/Pages/wildfire-damage-housing-relief-program.aspx> including a fillable application for requesting WDHRA financial assistance. While applicants can apply directly to OHCS for assistance, we hope that the local CAAs, Red Cross and Emergency Coordinators will be our primary referral sources.

"As part of the state's emergency response system, we will also continue to refer those who have lost their housing due to a disaster to their local community action agency for temporary housing assistance.

"If you have any questions or concerns regarding the WDHRA, please contact me at [margaret@ccno.org](mailto:margaret@ccno.org) or Sheila Parkins at [sheila.parkins@oregon.gov](mailto:sheila.parkins@oregon.gov)."

## Sinkhole repairs on hold

Repairs to the Anthony Lakes Highway Sinkhole near Antone Creek were originally scheduled to begin on Monday, August 17th and run through Thursday, August 20th, during which time the road was scheduled to be closed in the vicinity of the construction.

Due to increased fire activity on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest permanent repairs planned for the Anthony Lakes Highway (Forest Service Road 73) have been placed on hold. The road will remain open and a temporary patch is in place. Caution signs are on the road to warn drivers of the temporary repair, and forest officials urge continued caution while driving on Anthony Lakes Highway.

The final repairs will resume once fire activity has slowed in the region.

## Stices Gulch



Submitted Photo.

Stices Gulch resident Jenny Long said Greater Bowen Valley Fire Chief Jim Devlin is her hero after her family's home was saved.

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Folks sat and chatted with each other, asking about experiences and sharing their own. Most were relieved that their losses were limited to surface land crops and trees. Only two houses out of the 20 or so in the area were lost, along with several structures. Most of the residents' homes were saved by the firefighters from harm—including that of Greater Bowen Valley Fire Chief Jim Devlin and his wife, Penny, who also volunteers for the department. The Devlins lost four of their own outbuildings.

Residents had been allowed in to check their properties and, although the devastation was tremendous, most attending were relieved that they had homes to return to once the evacuation orders were lifted.

Many residents were staying with friends or family.

Glen Nelson and his wife, Jill, were amazed by, as Glen said, "how the fire came right up to our haystack, and then turned. We still have a haystack!"

Others had similar stories of seemingly random action by the fire.

One found his wood stack of seasoned timber still intact, although the fire had obviously come right up to the stack.

"I would have thought it would go for sure," he told the group. "It's well-seasoned and dry, but it's fine. Fire didn't touch it."

Devlin called group to order around 6:15 p.m., and gave an overview for the residents. He talked about the unusual degree of collaboration between all of the service agencies involved.

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**The BCP:** What is your favorite thing about being City Manager?

**Mike:** There is no day that is the same. It's not a job where you come sit down at your computer and work on documents all day. You never know what's going to happen with the next phone call. I enjoy police work, so I enjoy overseeing the police department and I've really come to enjoy public works, all the things that they do. Fire was interesting to me too—it's a dream job for me.

I've had probably had more stress overall doing this job except for a couple times being a policeman. At least nobody has ever actually tried kill me in this position (he laughed)—that I know of.

**The BCP:** What is your least favorite thing about being City Manager?

**Mike:** I don't know. There have been a couple times throughout the years that I've been here that I didn't seem to have the Council support that I thought was necessary. Let's just say that politics would be my least favorite thing. That's a better way to say it.

**The BCP:** What has been your biggest challenge?

**Mike:** Without a doubt the biggest challenge was the day that we found out we had cryptosporidium in the drinking water. That was the worst time of my life.

**The BCP:** What would you say has been your biggest accomplishment?

**Mike:** Probably the thing I will look back on and be most happy about is the fact that we've got the water treatment facility that we have. That is thing I feel best about leaving the City of Baker with. We now have a good water treatment system and nobody should ever get sick again from something like cryptosporidium or at least a waterborne disease. I think that is definitely what I'm most happy about.

**The BCP:** Parting thoughts?

**Mike:** What I think people need to remember, what I hear from people and I think if you've been here for a long time, you kind of take things for granted. The city is just a great place to live, with great people, and we need to remind ourselves of that. Try to get along with each other, make this a better place to live, which we can do. People want to live in Baker City. We just need to show them our best side.