

Local

Special City Council meeting held—all about more fees

BY GINA K. SWARTZ
Gina@TheBakerCountyPress.com

Tuesday evening a special City Council meeting was held for fee discussion.

The meeting began promptly at seven o'clock with all Councilors present and a handful of community members.

City Council reviews fees set by the City every year before the final adoption of the City Budget. With an increase in water rates and an implementation of a Public Safety Fee both on the horizon there was much to talk about.

Finance Director Jeanie Dexter began the discussion.

Dexter had prepared and presented to Council a spreadsheet that outlined the impact raising City Water rates would have to the community and the revenue it would create.

With very large, very expensive projects looming within the water department such as replacing pipe on the Mountain line that delivers water from the water shed to the City, the drilling of a new well and DEQ requirements regarding effluent water disposal that will likely require the City to borrow money to complete and increase in revenue is desperately needed.

A couple years ago, the City was advised by an outside consulting company evaluating the City's water systems, that the City needed to increase their water rates immediately by 25%.

The City Council at that time decided that the rate increase could be better negotiated with the citizens if it was raised over time and agreed to raise the rate over the period of three years by 10% each year.

Rates were raised by 10% last year and another increase is needed this year, the City says.

Dexter presented the Council with two different examples of rate increases one for 10% and another of 12.8%.

In her spreadsheet, she showed what current rates look like so that Council could see the differences that each of the suggested rate hike would make.

Current monthly base rates are \$36 for water, \$18.86 for wastewater and \$1 for a sidewalk fee.

In her first example, with a 10% base rate increase water rates would raise to \$39.60, waste water rates would raise to \$20.75 and the \$1 sidewalk fee would be replaced by a \$3 per household, \$6 per business Public Safety Fee.

The average residential water bill would see an increase of \$7.49 with a 10% increase that included a \$3 Public Safety Fee.

This increase would potentially raise \$350,255.

With a 12.8% base rate increase water rates would raise to \$40.61 waste water rates would raise to \$21.27 and the \$1 Sidewalk Fee would be replaced by a \$3/\$6 Public Safety Fee.

The average residential water bill would raise by \$9.02.

Potential revenue generated would be \$449,000.

These numbers were based on low usage cus-



Gina K. Swartz / The Baker County Press

Tom Muller suggested that the City's Police and Fire Departments should become voluntary in order to save money.

tomers and the impact to higher usage customers would be somewhat higher.

After her presentation, Council allowed for citizen comment.

First to address Council was Tom Muller he began by saying that he did not understand where some of the big numbers were coming from regarding the needs that the City was referring to as the bases for their need to increase the water rates in the first place.

Public Works Director Michelle Owen addressed his concern by explaining to Muller that the biggest looming concern was with effluent wastewater disposal.

The City currently treats the wastewater and then discharges it in the Powder River.

DEQ has placed restrictions on the practice and is requiring the City to develop a new plan for disposal of effluent waste water.

Owen explained that currently the option being explored is land application that will require land purchases, acquiring easement rights, and construction of storage facilities.

She advised that the City is also looking at drilling a new well and is currently replacing pipe on the Mountain Line as well as other very old piping throughout the City's infrastructure, all of which is very expensive.

She also advised that even with the proposed rate increases there would still be needs within the water and waste water departments that would go unmet.

Owen stated that the reality was that to complete many of the project that needed to be done, the City would need to borrow money.

She explained that lenders would not even consider the City's loan requests unless they could show that they had reasonable means to pay back the loan.

She said by raising rates, "That gets us on the road to being able to pay back the loans that we'll have to take out."

Muller told Owen, "Appreciate your being transparent and upfront."

Owen also told Muller that all the master plans are available online at the

City's website so he could familiarize himself with them if he wished.

She also told him that she would be happy to sit down with him and explain anything in those plans. Muller, seemingly satisfied with those explanations, then went on to attack the Public safety fee.

He stated that he had spoken extensively with Citizens throughout the community and had found that the majority of those he'd spoken with were angry about the fee.

He pointed out that the company that had been hired to bill for ambulance services, which had projected an increase in collections, saw a revenue loss of \$80,000, in collections which he called "The ambulance disaster."

Muller stated he felt a decline in population was a factor as well as a drop for calls for ambulance service.

Muller did not have any evidence to back up either of those claims.

During May budget meetings, Fire Chief Tom Wills advised the Budget board of the opposite regarding service calls by stating call volume was consistently rising.

Muller continued, saying, "The City Council does not own up to mistakes that have cost a lot of money, instead they make the citizens of Baker City pay a \$3 fee and businesses a \$6 fee. We ask the City (Council) members to send it to the voters, let them decide. City Manager Fred Warner says it could take up to a year to get it before the citizens of Baker City but he says we need it (the money) now."

Owen did note that a general election was not set for this November and the next general election would take place in 2018.

She also said that to get something on a ballot for a special election was very costly, in the thousands of dollars, and said that such cost far outweighed the benefit.

Muller suggested using both the City Police and City Fire departments in volunteer departments as a solution.

He then went on to call attention to pay increases that were union-negotiated as being unnecessary and unreasonable in a time of financial strain.

He was not alone in that thought as it was heard throughout the handful of citizens who stepped forward to speak, with all seeming to feel that all City employees were overpaid.

Penny Reinks said she felt that the average citizen in Baker City only needed \$20,000 to \$25,000 to live comfortably.

Another citizen who spoke was very blunt in her words, "You had your money. Now it's gone. That was your budget. I don't know what you're going to do, probably cut back. If it was this easy to get money for schools Baker High School would be made of gold. But you can have three meetings, run something through and put it on our water bill so we'll never even notice. Wow! Again, I don't know what you're going to do but you're out of money."

Kenneth Martin likened the City Council to a "mock mafia" and angrily said, "I'm ashamed of you people. This town was started by crooks and been run that way ever since."

Ryc Reinks approached Council and began by saying, "Need I say more? We've had this conversation before and you keep right on going, doing what you seem destined to do despite input from the community. I think you made it a big mistake when you called it a Public Safety Fee. I think the bigger issue is the water, maybe that is a better way to go."

Only one citizen spoke in favor of the fee: Don Herman. He said, "I'd like you to know that I am 100% in agreement with the public safety fee. It is a pittance to pay for the safety that we rely on. I have been in the unenviable position of having to make that call. When you call 911 you expect professionals to show up with equipment and address your issue. I've been in communities that don't have this same attitude and it is heart wrenching to see it what happens to the town as its going down the tubes."

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Sumpter holds short hearing about grows

BY MEGHAN ANDERSCH
Meghan@TheBakerCountyPress.com

Sumpter City Council voted to adopt Ordinance 2017-4 banning commercial marijuana grows in the Sumpter City limits in a special meeting held after a public hearing on May 31st. Mayor Clarke and Council members Linda Wise and Robert Armbruster were in attendance.

Clarke opened the hearing at 7 p.m. to hear public testimony from anyone who had not already testified. No new public testimony was available, so Clarke closed the hearing and opened a special meeting.

The Council voted unanimously that the second reading of the ordinance be in title only. City Recorder Julie McKinney performed the second reading.

The Council voted unanimously to adopt the ordinance, which had been declared an emergency due to potential negative impact on the City water and sewer systems. McKinney stated the ordinance will now go to the OLCC and Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development.

McKinney said Gayle Moore cannot serve on the budget committee and requested that Council approve Cheryl Sheller in her place to attend the budget meeting on the following day. Council approved unanimously.

Tip-a-Cop raises more money



Submitted Photo.

BCPD officers and reserves helped serve customers to raise money for Special Olympics.

According to Special Olympics Treasurer and Ski Coach Stephanie Tweit, "People really gave last night while only six officers ran like crazy serving tables, cleaning tables and lots of socializing. We hit our highest ever with \$2,850 and a big thank you to Luke Brown and all the Barleys crew."

Tweit added, "We had six athletes there and a lot of return customers who love the wild atmosphere of Tip-a-Cop. Several officers were called out so when duty calls, we understand. The reserves did awesome!"

Tip-a-Cop was held last Thursday evening, and is an annual event pitting Police against the Fire in two separate annual events that raise money for local Special Olympics.

This fall Serve-it-up-Hot with the local fire department will be held. According to Tweit, possibly this winter the Sheriff's Office may join in the competition.

Summer reading program at library

Readers of all ages will join together to build a better world this summer as Baker County Public Library presents "Build a Better World" during their summer library program.

The fun will begin with a kickoff by the Traveling Lantern performance troupe play of "The Ribbles Build a Residence" on June 7th at 4:00.

For eight weeks the library will have storytime, science and engineering experiments, group games, messy art projects, songs, and more.

Our storytimes are for babies, pre-K, and early elementary and are Tuesdays at 5:30-6:30 p.m. and Wednesdays and Fridays at 10:00-11:00 a.m.. They also have Lego Club on Fridays at 11:00-12:00. New this year for our fourth through sixth grades is a "Tween Book Club." The group will get together every Tuesday from 1:00-2:00 p.m. to read books, talk about them, make crafts, and eat snacks. There is also have something for teens! The Literary Society, for teens only, is an after-hours program that will be held twice a month on Fridays at 6:00 p.m. Participants will watch movies, play games, read books, and generally have fun. On August 2nd the summer reading program ends with a celebration and prizes.

The 2017 Summer Reading Program is open to people of all ages, with programs, prize drawings, story times, a reading club, and more. Registration begins on June 1, 2017 and is required to be eligible for prizes. Families are invited to join the fun by reading together. For more information about how to register and a schedule of upcoming events, visit the library website at www.bakerlib.org. All programs are free of charge.