

Prairie City to update employee personnel policy

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Prairie City is updating its employee handbook and is looking to adopt the personnel policy next month.

In a July 6 work session with elected officials and city employees, the main policies discussed were the city's paid time off, on-call policies for the public works department and the grievance process when it concerns a council member.

Prairie City Public Works Director Chris Camarena asked about the grievance process regarding complaints concerning a city council member.

Prairie City Mayor Jim Hamsher said the process is spelled out in the Prairie City Council Rules and Procedures Handbook.

According to the handbook, the meeting decorum section, a councilor's conduct toward city employees is regulated when it states that council members are not to "engage in personal attacks, or impugn the motives of a speaker," the rule book states. "Council members will not criticize or attack each other, city staff, or other persons."

The public works department employees are currently on call every third week for seven days and receive 12.25 hours in comp time hours, which they have the option of cashing out at the end of the year.

The proposed policy, which mirrors John Day's, pays the employees for an hour and a half on Saturday and Sunday and would pay them time and a half should they get called into work.

The reason for the policy change, Hamsher said, is that the city cannot afford to pay out hundreds of hours of comp time at the end of the year as they have been.

He said it's more fair to both the city and the employees to pay them both the overtime rate for the hour and a half spent on call over the weekend and for their time spent on any emergency calls.

Anna Bass from Solutions CPAs accounting firm said the comp time is a significant cost to the city.

Camarena said the city will not keep employees if they cut their benefits.

"This city talks about always looking out to keep our employees here," he said. "But you're not going to keep them here if you start cutting their benefits."

Bass said the financial impact of losing the comp time benefit is not comparable to how it affects the city.

"The comp time benefit is very expensive, and as the employees get paid and cost-of-living-adjustment raises go up, and taxes go up, your comp time costs you a quarter of a percent," she said.

Camarena said paying an employee overtime instead of comp time would be more costly to the city in the long run.

Hamsher said it is costing the city more to pay out large sums of money in comp time at the end of



Chris Camarena



Anna Bass

year. He said the purpose of the policy is to give the employees the time off instead of paying out large sums of money.

Another policy discussed was the paid time off policy. City Councilor Georgia Patterson pointed out that the draft did not include, as it did in the previous policy, that an employee who has been there 20 years accrues 16 hours of paid vacation per month.

She said it needed to be added to the final draft since it had always been the policy.

"I feel that is fair," Patterson said. "You encourage people to stay, so give them something to work towards."

City Councilor Joe Phippen said the president of the United States does not even get that many paid vacation hours.

Patterson said they were not talking about the president.

"We're not talking about the president of the United States," she said. "We are talking about Prairie City employees."

Phippen said they are Public Works employees. Patterson said he was mistaken, that the policy applied to all city employees.

Camarena said, as a 20-year employee, it would not be fair for the city to strip him of the benefit and that he worked for the time.

Hamsher suggested the employees make a list of suggestions and that he would take them to the city lawyer for review.

After the session, Camarena told the Eagle that he, his department and the city's elected officials agree that the city needs an updated, consistent personnel policy that works for both his department and the city.

He said a "boilerplate template" will not fit for the water and sewage systems in Prairie City.

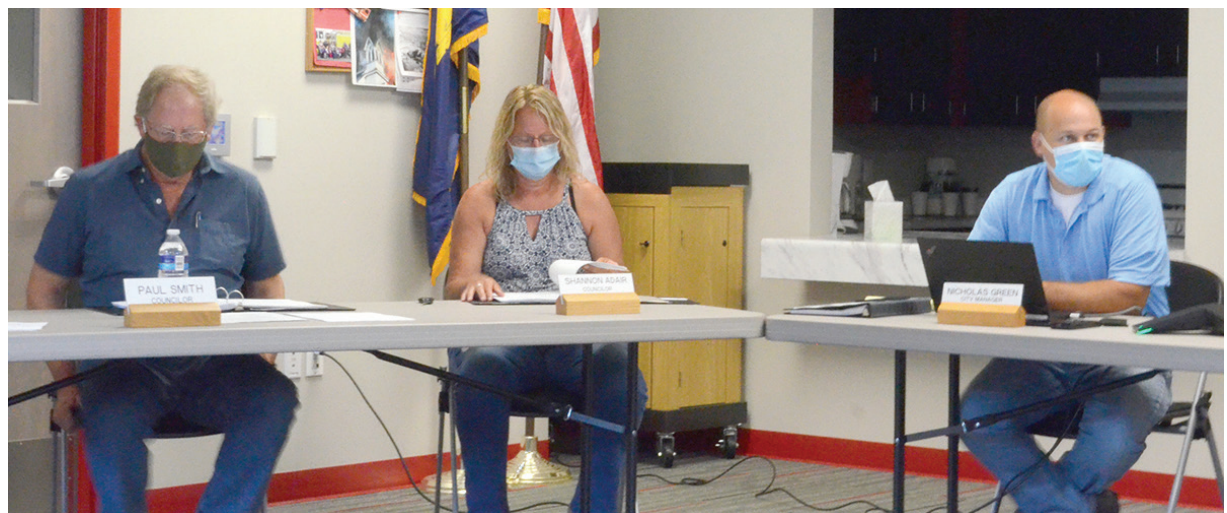
For instance, John Day, Camarena said, is on a well system, while Prairie City is on an infiltration gallery, a horizontal channel system to collect and intercept groundwater by gravity flow, upstream from Dixie Creek.

Maintaining and checking the water system brings a different set of responsibilities, he said.

He also pointed out the demands of the COVID-19 requirements and regulations such as the public bathrooms needing to be cleaned and sanitized multiple times a day, seven days a week.

Overall, Camarena said the city and the public works department want the same thing: a personnel policy that is consistent and in the best interest of the city.

"We've never had a good personnel policy, and everybody is on the same page that we need that," he said. "The verbiage just needs to be adapted to fit Prairie City."



John Day City Manager Nick Green presents an update on the proposed wastewater treatment plant to the city council July 14.

John Day's wastewater treatment plant overcoming hurdles

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

While the new wastewater treatment plant in John Day has seen much analysis and data gathering over the years, new milestones are expected to be met this fiscal year.

During the John Day City Council meeting on July 14, City Manager Nick Green gave an update on the project that has seen many hurdles.

The budget for design of the plant was \$396,500, including \$196,500 from a Community Development Block Grant and \$200,000 as the city match.

"We went into this knowing the final design hinges on a successful procurement of the package treatment plant because we needed the shop drawings and the site construction drawings from plant manufacturer in order to know how to solicit for the construction services at the site," Green said.

Phase 1 of the project has been focusing on the preliminary design report to get procurement documents for the membrane bioreactor, which is the equipment for filtration, and legal and environmental paperwork. This phase is 95% complete.

Phase 2 continues with the preliminary design report and focuses on the gravity sewer line connecting the existing collection system to the new treatment plant, solids handling, operations building and more. This phase is 63% complete.

Phase 3 of the project focuses on the final design for engineering. This was put on hold in March as the city awaits final approval of the preliminary engineering report and funding approval.

The environmental package has been submitted to the CDBG and the U.S. Department of Agriculture for review and approval, which allows the project to proceed, according to Green.

"What we were not able to do was award the package treatment plant because the USDA, as a lender, wanted to see additional analysis on the various alternatives that were proposed, updated cost profiles and several things they wanted to see revised," Green said.

Green added that Flagline Engineering will be a second set of eyes on the wastewater treatment plant project to make sure the city is procuring the best option for the residents.

The city defined the scope of work with Flagline Engineering to write a technical appendix to the preliminary engineering report. Engi-



The current John Day wastewater treatment plant Aug. 15.

Eagle file photo

neering firm Anderson Perry has been asked to stop work on the preliminary design report until the technical appendix is completed.

City Councilor Dave Holland mentioned that some of the slowdown in this process was caused by the USDA. Green said they have a lot of attention to detail and there were also procedures and analysis they wanted to be followed before they made an award.

"In the long run, it's not going to hurt us, other than we've lost some time and we may even find there's alternatives in the engineering that can save us some money," Green said. "I'm trying to look at the bright side. Otherwise we would have awarded already, and we'd be in construction."

Green plans to apply for \$1.5 million in additional funding from Business Oregon's Water/Wastewater program. The city agenda states that half is expected to be grant funds and the other half is expected to be loans at approximately 2.2% annual interest.

"As the USDA is reviewing the preliminary engineering report and the environmental paperwork, our goal is to have their funding, CDBG funds and Water/Wastewater funds approved this fiscal year which would be the balance of the money we need to complete the project," Green said.

The one thing engineers are going to look at, per request of the USDA, is the scalability of the plant.

Green said looking at the regulation for the plant, it has to be designed for the city's 20-year forecast, which shows the city losing population. This would mean designing for a smaller

population than the city has today.

"That is illogical," Green said. "Even designing for today's population ignores all the work we've done in the last four years to open up new residential housing, incentivized housing and new businesses."

Green added that they are trying to show the USDA the city has a path for growth and that the facility needs to be designed so it can be scaled to accommodate for the growth.

The city council voted and passed a motion to approve the Flagline scope of work and authorize the city manager to award a service agreement to Flagline subject to final review and approval by Business Oregon, the USDA and city attorney.

They also passed a motion to authorize the mayor and city manager to apply for \$1.5 million in Business Oregon Water/Wastewater financing for the treatment plant.

In other city news:

- The city council voted to approve the professional services agreement with GHD Engineering Inc. This is for the Fourth Avenue repair project, which will begin construction next spring and be completed by next fall.

- A pre-bid on-site meeting was held on July 13 for the Phase 1 plans for Seventh Street parking lot project. On July 23 bids are due and the notice of intent to award will be on July 24. This project is funded by a grant from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

The agenda states that the Phase 1 plan requires site grading of a new 0.90-acre site for a parking lot at the west end of Seventh Street, just south of the current Parks and Rec office building.

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