

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

1998 should include open government

As 1998 gets underway, it's quite clear that the people who are governed expect their elected officials and government employees to operate openly and with consideration for the taxpayers.

Taxpayers are not naive. They don't expect services to be provided free, but they do expect public servants, elected or hired, to be candid about the decisions they make. This expectation is too often ignored.

At Monday's City Council meeting, it was instructional to see the council vote for a meter reading system that had not previously been considered. They had the information in time to review it...it certainly wasn't a replay of last November's fiasco. What was instructional was that there was absolutely no information available for the public. The only material about the program was marked "Confidential".

The program approved appears to be a good choice, this isn't an objection to the decision. But why is the city being so secretive about how they are using public funds?

Another example is the recent hiring of a "Clerk" by the city. In November, the city advertised for a Director of Finance and, in December, hired a person for that position. Three weeks later the new hire left. Then, without posting the position, City Administrator Gordon Zimmerman hired a person to be a Clerk.

Zimmerman is the administrator, true, but common courtesy dictates that he would tell the council why he wanted to change the position. That is what other administrators have done. To cap it then by hiring for a new position without any posting is not only a slap in the face of anyone who might want to apply for the position, it may not even be legal. Is this how to be open and aboveboard?

Another instance of little discussion by the council was approval of \$7800 for new computer hardware. The discussion that didn't occur should have addressed whether all new equipment is needed, or whether it would be possible to upgrade some of it. Why are there so few questions from the council? Is it because the city has a surplus of money? Hardly.

Another suggestion the council approved, reopening a study of where city offices should be located, may eliminate some buildings (such as the Joy Theatre), but doesn't address why public funds should be used to study unsuitable buildings or locations in the first place. The old buildings were not included in the initial study, but locations were. One criteria that was used was the availability of parking, which obviously eliminates most of downtown. Another criteria was cost, which is one reason the free site was selected.

All of these expenditures have been recommended by an administrator who was hired because of a reputation for fiscal responsibility. They were all accepted by a council that, mostly, rolled over and played dead.

If Vernonia city government is going to be successful in 1998, the council will have to become involved.

The people of Vernonia deserve the best of the council's efforts...and the councilors, themselves, deserve the pleasure the comes with a job well done.



City Scene

By Julius Dalzell
Vernonia City Council

The last City Scene column discussed the issue of a revenue bond authorization to help pay for needed improvements to Vernonia's water distribution system. The point emphasized was that water use rates will have to be increased to repay borrowed funds. Unless additional grant funds miraculously become available, the remaining option to minimize the increase is to add users, i.e. to spread the debt load.

It was noted that one large water user would have the same minimizing effect on costs as many small users. Regardless, an increase in the number using the system and the amount being used appears to be a practical response.

However, as previously mentioned, this could lead to another dilemma. The dilemma stems from the fact that the water system is only one element of the infrastructure that requires expenditures for maintenance and improvements. In each case, if borrowing is necessary, the cost to each of us increases. The dilemma is the predictability of upwardly spiraling costs and the consequential result of becoming increasingly less attractive to new businesses and residents—the very elements that could help share the cost increases.

So what should be our response? Do we allow the infrastructure to remain as it is, "band-aiding" only when it is essential to maintain some minimal level of functionality? A counter to that posture could entail seeking rapid expansion of the community with a resultant increase in the user base.

The alternative of doing little could conceivably work for a while. However, the system in question will either eventually stop functioning, or reach a state where even a temporary fix would be exceedingly expensive. In the extreme, we could simply let the infrastructure fall apart so that continuing to operate as a community becomes unattainable.

At that point, the cost of facilitating "a fix" could be so extensive that each of us might instead be paid to leave. What a notion! For most, if not all of us, such an idea would be dismissed as an absurdity not worthy of thought, let alone further consideration.

So we're going to stay put and look after Vernonia! But there still remains those pesky costs. What about the alternative of encouraging rapid growth, at least until the stage is reached wherein the infrastructure is upgraded enough to

remain healthy for some period into the future? Lots of questions of the what, why, when and how nature come to mind. The "why" of pursuing rapid growth would be to control improvement costs. Here are some examples of "what"s and "how"s:

- How do we incite growth and at what cost?
 - Is sufficient land available within the urban growth boundary to accommodate residential, commercial and industrial facilities?
 - What would be the impact on fire protection, medical and emergency services, and the school system?
 - What about parking in the downtown and the traffic impact on Highway 47?
 - Would our rural lifestyle be degraded and supplemented by the negatives synonymous with urban/suburban growth?
- (From the perspective of lifestyle and livability, the effects of the cure may be more unacceptable than the ailment.)

The key question, however, is "when." Timing is everything! If we could control "when," the prospect of rapid growth might not be so intimidating. Ideally, we could turn it on, control the rate of expansion during the period of need, then turn it off upon achieving our objective. But the dynamics of economic expansion aren't quite that simple.

There are nearby, evolving case studies of what can happen in municipalities when too rapid growth takes control. Excessive growth can challenge municipalities as readily as stagnation by substituting the need for funds to maintain systems with a need for funds to keep up with surging infrastructure and service needs. So rapid growth may not be the panacea!

What's left? The answer is economic in part, but in a way that fits Vernonia and coincides with the community's preferences. In other words, a policy founded on several key guiding tenets:

- endorses planning and taking control;
- encourages private investment and property improvements;
- endorses (a degree of) growth as required to assist the economy in Vernonia to attain a healthy level of activity and sustainability;
- nurtures those having needs and, most importantly,
- supports those, having the ability and initiative, to attain a reasonable state of economic well-being.

In brief, we are attempting to define the basis of a practical approach to moving Vernonia forward. The next column of City Scene will conclude this series.