

Trials and Tribulations of Running a Small City

A REPORT ON THE CITY OF WILLITS

MAY 14, 2010

Summary

According to The City of Willits, (City), elected officials and staff, the City priorities are safety, clean water, and sewer service. The early retirement of seven employees without a replacement plan was a concern of the Grand Jury, (GJ). Consolidating responsibilities to the remaining employees may be cost effective in the short run. However, the added work load will make City services suffer. Staff will be forced to concentrate on reacting rather than planning, leading to missed opportunities and greater costs down the road.

All city employees deferred their annual cost of living raise in July 2009 to accommodate the decrease in City revenues due to the economic recession.

Background

The City has a council-manager form of government. The City Council makes policy and the City Manager implements the policy. The agenda and informational packets are distributed on Friday to Council Members prior to the following Wednesday's council meeting.

In November 2009, a voter referendum changed the City Clerk position from elected to appointed. A second referendum eliminated the position of Treasurer, whose duties were transferred to the Office of the Finance Director.

The Public Works Department has a Public Works Director, six employees, and one administrative assistant. The Public Works Department is responsible for city streets, sidewalks, parks, buildings, the airport, and equipment.

The city owned airport was recently the staging area for Cal-Fire during the 2008 forest fires. The airport has new card-locks for fuel which allows for branded fuels. The 2009-2010 budget for the airport shows that the cost for the airport is supplemented by the City's general fund.

The wastewater plant is currently being upgraded. The modern use of ultra-violet light for purification will be used to replace chlorine.

Methods

The 2009-2010 GJ interviewed elected officials, management, and staff. The GJ

toured city facilities and reviewed documents, including the City Council agendas with backup documents, engineering studies, and the City budget.
A GJ member was recused from this report due to a conflict of interest.

Findings

1. The City Council receives mandatory annual training in the Brown Act, ethics, and sexual harassment. Leadership and boardsmanship training is at the discretion of each City Council Member.
2. The City does not pay for retirees' health care. The Cal-PERS retirement system is used.
3. Seven of the City's employees retired early in December, 2009. The incentive to retire was an offer of two years of paid health care coverage.
4. The Director of Public Works and the Water Treatment Plant Supervisor positions were vacated due to early retirement. The responsibilities for both positions are under the direction of the City Manager.
5. All City employees deferred their cost of living raises in July, 2009.
6. City Council members get a \$50/month stipend, recently reduced from \$150/month. They continue to receive City funded health care coverage.
7. Infiltration of surface water into the sewer system is six to eight times greater during a storm.
8. The City recently purchased a camera equipped truck to check for ground water infiltration into the waste water system.
9. There is no emergency water connection between the City and Brooktrails Township.
10. Morris and Centennial Reservoirs are the primary sources of water for the City.
11. In January 2010, a study was released stating that the Morris Dam had been certified safe by the State and "good for at least another 80 years", and that the height of the dam can be raised an additional 20 feet.
12. City Ordinance §12.36.020, "Prohibited Activities", prohibits sleeping overnight in a recreational vehicle, (RV), anywhere within City limits without a permit.
13. Shrubbery and trees on street corners block visibility to drivers and pedestrians and continue to be a safety hazard.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. City Council members make leadership and board training mandatory for new or re-elected council members. On-line training is available at a minimal cost. (Finding 1)
2. the positions of the Public Works Director and the Water Plant Supervisor be filled. (Finding 3-4)

3. City Council members reinstate their stipend when the economy improves. (Finding 6)
4. the reduction of ground water infiltration into the sewer system continues to be a priority to extend the life of the system, to contain costs, and comply with government regulations. (Finding 7-8)
5. the City create an emergency water intertie with Brooktrails Township. (Finding 9)
6. the City seek grant funding to raise the height of the Morris Dam to increase reservoir capacity. (Finding 10-11)
7. the Recreational Vehicle Ordinance be revised to exclude the requirement for permits to allow overnight stays in RVs, of less than 48 hours, on private property. (Finding 12)
8. the City enforce the safety ordinance that requires shrubbery and trees on street corners be trimmed by property owners. (Finding 13)

Discussion

Due to the increased scope of responsibilities and required activities, the performance of multiple jobs by the City Manager is an unreasonable expectation. Service eventually will suffer, errors may be made, and opportunities may be lost.

Required Responses

City of Willits Council Members (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (Findings 9-11; Recommendations 5-6)

Brooktrails Township Board of Directors (Findings 9-11; Recommendations 5-6)

Requested Responses

City of Willits Code Enforcement Officer (Finding 12-13; Recommendations 7-8)