

## Mayor's Corner: Fee hikes chip away at utility needs

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Published in the Chinook Observer on January 23, 2018



2017 is history, and now we have turned our energy to 2018. The budget process was difficult, but the City Council worked hard and was very engaged. They made some tough decisions, including the decision to increase the utility rates. The council reviewed the needs of the city the same way homeowners and businesses do each year for their finances. They looked at the challenges facing the city to supply services, comply with state and federal regulatory requirements, make necessary improvements, and continue regular maintenance, being mindful that these utility systems run 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Bear in mind that, as citizens themselves, whatever council members approve, they must also pay.

The water system has 48.5 miles of water lines, 481 valves, 175 hydrants, and roughly 2,000 water meters. Due to the aging water meters and their antiquated status, they are no longer able to capture all water usage and identify leaks in a timely manner. The city has begun the process of replacing the old meters with new remote read meters. This change will alleviate hundreds of hours reading meters each year by the crew. We expect this project to take multiple years to complete. As required by state law, we must update our water comprehensive plan, which costs approximately \$100,000. This will identify and more accurately reflect the health of our system, as well as prioritize future maintenance improvements. Currently, we have \$4,115,000 of work to be completed, and with this year's rate increase, we will capture \$159,500 of that total.

The storm water system was installed in 1996 to help alleviate flooded streets during the rainiest months. The city only had one storm water pump station and relied on Pacific County drainage ditches to remove water. At times the ditches couldn't keep up, and in some places over a foot of water accumulated on the streets. This caused a traffic hazard and damage to the streets. The current storm water system has 17 miles of drainage lines, 902 catch basins and three pump stations. There are still roads that hold water during big storms, but we have significantly reduced the number of streets affected. The biggest expense this year is to increase pump capacity and maintain the capacity at the three stations. More than \$20,000 is needed for maintenance and repairs. The expenses associated with this year are about \$120,000. In all, \$256,000 is needed for scheduled improvements and repairs/maintenance of the system. The rate increase is expected to offset \$25,000 of that total.

The waste water system was originally installed in the 1950s. It currently has 15.46 miles of sewer lines, 115 manholes and seven lift stations. The two biggest issues in this utility are deferred maintenance and the new demands to modify land application of our biosolids. The Department of Ecology (DOE) has mandated we change our process and be operational by 2020. We have evaluated all of our options to identify diverse ways of treating the biosolids, short-term systems, long-term systems, as well as what best benefits the city's needs and long-term goals, and controls cost. The public meetings dedicated to this topic were held in order to discuss the goal of turning the biosolids into compost that can be used by homeowners, contractors, businesses and schools. The initial cost is \$7 million to build, and we are looking to the DOE for a 50 percent forgiveness loan (no guarantees). We are currently working with the City of Ilwaco and Seaview Sewer District on a plan to convert our combined biosolids into one processing plant to be shared by all of us regionally. Long Beach will own and operate the treatment facility and sell capacity and treatment to Ilwaco and the Seaview Sewer District. The rate increase will bring in \$118,000 to help with the mandated and ongoing operation of the waste water plant.

I am confident the decision we have made for biosolids is the right long-term solution. Environmentally, it is the best process to safeguard our community and the ground water. It will also allow us to look at processing other entities' biosolids for a fee.