

IN THE MAIL

THE VIEWS OF OUR READERS

Beg to differ with Mayor

To the Editor,
I am afraid I must beg to differ with the Mayor's recent declaration that he felt by virtue of the past water and sewer indebtedness refinancing there was tacit approval of his use of city funds to purchase additional radio control meters, over and above the study group the council approved.

Not only was there not tacit approval, there were specific discussions about how the COUNCIL would approach all future decisions to be made on the meters. The meter issue was discussed repeatedly in finance committee meetings, water and sewer committee meetings and regular council meetings. The council was very clear that the initial approval for changing out 100 meters was the absolute limit until such time as documented information on the potential savings, which we were told could result from the new meters, was reviewed.

Up until the time the 100-meter test study had been approved we had been regaled with a sales pitch from the Mayor as to cost effectiveness and water savings, but we had received no documented proof of how or to what extent this could happen.

We were told that the meters would pay for themselves within a short time, now it appears that has been changed to a number of years. We never even received any proof that the old meters under-read water usage, which was where the money savings was supposed to come from.

Before we jumped in with both feet and decided to saddle the ratepayers of Dillon with a potentially needless \$467,000 bill (1,625 meters x \$287 price quoted in the paper,) we wanted justification. The council specifically set the limit, specifically set the time table for reviewing the water use and "potential savings" and established that the meters to be changed would be through regular maintenance and suspect houses where there appeared to be a possible water loss problem. More importantly we made it very clear why we were setting the limits. We felt it was inappropriate to enter into a course of action to purchase "Gee Whiz" technology if it was not needed and would not be cost effective for the city.

From the time we established this test study of meters we tracked what has going on with the installations. At almost every council meeting and certainly at most of the committee meetings, the Mayor was asked how the installation of the new meters was progressing, how many were installed and when the test period would begin.

We were repeatedly told that the meter installation was going slowly, there were lots of interruptions so the meters were not getting changed as quickly as possible.

In fact, I believe at one meeting we were told that the water crew could only install six to eight meters a month at the most in a good month.

When I resigned in November the 100 meters had still not been installed, or so we were told, so the test study had not started yet.

Now, just eight months later we find out that not only were the initial 100 meters installed, but also 144 more meters have been installed at what appears to be an obviously accelerated rate of exchange. I know the meter at my house was recently changed for no other reason than we had a dog in our yard. I was told the old meter was fine. The expense for those meter purchases was not budgeted. The old meters could be changed out at around \$100, as opposed to \$287 for the new ones.

The study the council demanded before the council was to make a decision on expanding the project, or not, has been ignored. The mayor did not have the authority to make the decision he made with regards to the additional meters and the unbudgeted expenditure of \$36,184.38. Not one shred of paper has crossed the council table to show how the meters are saving money. The mayor's "administration decision" completely ignored the authority of the council in setting limits on what he can do. He completely ignored the importance of the budget process, and he completely ignored the charter form of government this city adopted. The mayor cannot plead ignorance of the charter government, which provides for a weak mayor-strong council form of government. Most of you will recall the charter government was approved due to recommendations by the government study commission of which Marty was a member, several years before he ran for Mayor.

If the meters were the only unbudgeted expenditure things could be worked out to eventually break even, by making cuts in some services, possibly staff cuts for next year. But unfortunately, the meters are not the only unbudgeted overrun. During the budget process in 2003 we received a request for retroactive pay in the amount of \$20,000 from the city attorney.

The finance committee approved the city attorney wage, with a cost of living increase, like every other employee of the city, but we did not approve the retroactive pay request and referred the matter for further review. The council was certainly willing to talk about the pay, because the city attorney should be paid for work he did, but there was concern about the request on a number of issues.

First, the council had no written agreement as to what the hiring arrangement had been between the mayor and the city attorney, and as I understand it, the requested written agreement has still not been received.

Second, despite repeated requests for a monthly itemization of work being done, hours involved, and costs, the council continued to receive only oral presentations during meetings, giving general highlights of work.

Third, there was some question if the city attorney could be participating in PERS. Finally there was concern about how to give \$20,000 in retroactive pay to someone working as an employee for the city on an hourly wage, participating in PERS retirement, without violating the labor laws of the state.

Before the finance committee could meet on the issue, however, the money was paid. In November, two months after the budget had been approved, the city attorney received an additional \$6,360.75, in December \$14,193.40, for total income of \$20,554.15, above his regular hourly wage, plus he received an additional \$8,289.25 specifically for SID #34. In comparison, the next six months averaged additional income was \$1,702 over the hourly wage. None of the \$39,055.40 in additional income was budgeted. So, now, in just two accounts the budget has been overrun by \$75,239.78. That is much harder to adjust for in coming years.

In our \$5,800,000 refinancing we had \$207,000,000 in the water and sewer accounts, which could have been used for improvements within the city. The refinancing was completed in June 2004. When I inquired the other day I was told there was around \$200,000 left.

The water and sewer account is the account that Councilman Warner questioned the use of for the major portion of city employee salaries. Although most of the money seems to have been used for some outlying city improvements, salary payments were certainly not the city improvements the council envisioned while working on the refinancing. One of the items on the wish list was the construction project on South Montana Street, as well as trying to do some other road improvements in Dillon. Right now there is not enough to even do South Montana Street, but that project is being pushed ahead. Somehow it is going to be financed.

To date there has been \$82,215, which has been paid for engineering and construction costs for the project. That money was not budgeted either. Add that to the list of unbudgeted payments and now the total is \$157,455.57.

In sometimes heated discussions on issues I had with Marty in the past I have asked why he wanted to do something that seemed to be in opposition to the regulations of the city. I got the answer several times "because I can." That seems to be contrary to how the mayor should be running the city. He should be saying I want to do it because it would be good for the people, or it would benefit the city.

On the few occasions when he would say it was good for the city he was not always able to explain why it was needed. Some of the things that have been done this last year have been very good for the city, I won't deny that. But how some of the projects have been presented and implemented has a detrimental certainly effect to the city now and in the future, and most certainly will have a detrimental effect on the taxpayers.

The city budget is not just so much paper and fluff. It is the hard earned money of the taxpayers, which the city is obligated to utilize with responsibility and fidelity. The council and the mayor take an oath of office to uphold the laws of the state and the city.

When the budget processes and the budgets are disregarded or minimized in importance by elected officials, it is a violation of the trust the voters give to their government.

The budget of the city is not a financial toy box, where money can be removed and played with, scattered to the wind or burned. The budget is the money the city is to operate on in a fiscally responsible manner. Not only is the use of the taxpayers money a precious trust the public has given to the Mayor and the council, it is a very limited resource, not an unlimited funding pool. This is something that may not be understood by people who have never had to operate within a budget. When the budget is overrun in one year it has a very negative impact on future budgets. It becomes the proverbial snowball rolling down the hill. Eventually the problem represented by \$36,184.38 for unbudgeted meters and \$39,055.40 in wages and \$82,215 for engineering in 2003-2004 becomes significantly larger in the next budget year, and even larger the following year.

I applaud Councilman Warner and past Councilman Brenneke for standing up and questioning the overruns, as well as the council for wanting further answers on the budget matters. I think it is time we all sit up; and pay attention. I disagree with Councilman Warner, however, that this has resulted in a commitment to replace all the meters. The fact is the council has the authority to order a stop to the new meter replacement and should do so immediately. The one-year study, which was originally ordered, needs to be completed. At that time, the council should make an informed decision about any further replacements

Jean Bergeson
Dillon



Issues concern reader

To The Editor:
Thanks for the positive input last week, and always. As the President tries to utter the word 'peace' and come full circle; no quarter. The martyrdom of control needs questioning.

First as to the stop light situation at the intersection of Helena and Montana Street in Dillon. This has been red or green, no yellow. I'm wondering if a synchronized stop light sensor has been installed, which triggers the light when vehicles approach. Are we intending to experience these lights in the usual hum drum way? As an alternative I'm hoping this is yet an experiment. As an alternative I'm hoping one will be a 'stop sign' light, and the other be yellow. Unless of course Dillon has high traffic yield. Is a bicycle lane in lieu as well, when chip sealing takes place in the spring 2005.

Secondly and most importantly, this coincidence is a monstrosity of human relations. To be specific, an employer/employee relation. My friend went to work for a firm six months ago. After she logged her first overtime, in which she had problems with her previous job when she was told she could not make over time, in which she was legally entitled. Her employer told her she didn't know about payroll overtime. Well, so the story goes, as Paul Harvey says, 'you know the rest of the story'. Well, she called in sick as a dog with flu symp-

toms going down hill for the past 3 days. She said she couldn't perform the job tasks. Her boss said she needed to come in. She said o.k. A few minutes later she called back and said she will not be in, and if she will still have her job, as well as when she would be to work, post-traumatically. Her boss didn't answer, only to hang up the phone. She got her check after haggling with the outfit, and the overtime she had logged was not included. Not to mention the tips she was due. The tips were being pooled and divided, which is illegal. She called back and asked why she was not provided for. By then she had already applied for unemployment. Her boss sent her a check for overtime, and apologized for not being diligent and mentioned she had lost her tips because she wasn't there to receive them. That made her feel like a dog, guilty at that.

This is why our Montana labor board exists. To insure employer/employee relations, blessed be. Oh yeah, this offense will assuredly be at the feet of the labor board. Just recently a motel in Dillon was fined \$25,000 for defying overtime payroll standards. My good word for the day, and I'm no stranger to the labor board proceedings, is to stand up for yourself. No thanks for nothing, thanks for everything. The accuser of the brethren stands accused. When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Bill Weaver
Dillon, MT

It is time for a change

To the Editor,
Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni, former Head of Central Command for U.S. forces in the Middle East and special envoy to the region for George W. Bush said this before the war: "It's pretty interesting that all the generals see it the same way, and all the others who have never fired a shot, and are hot to go to war, see it another; we are about to do something that will ignite a fuse in this region that we will rue the day we ever started."

There is an organization called Diplomats and Military Commanders for Change which states: "Diplomats and Military Commanders for Change are an unprecedented bipartisan coalition of 27 career chiefs of mission and retired four-star military leaders who have launched a nationwide campaign to press the need for change in U.S. foreign and defense policy because they are deeply concerned by the damage the Bush Administration has caused to our national and international interests."

It led the United States into an ill-planned and costly war from which exit is uncertain. It justified the invasion of Iraq by manipulation of uncertain intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, and by a cynical campaign to persuade the public that Saddam Hussein was linked to Al Qaeda and the attacks of September 11. The evidence did not support this argument. Our security has been weakened. The Bush Administration has shown that it does not grasp these circumstances of the new era, and is not able to rise to the responsibilities of world leadership in either style or substance. It is time for a change."

Our most respected and capable career military commanders, anti-terrorism experts, diplomats, military planners and weapons inspectors were forthright in giving their best advice about whether to go to war in Iraq (that we should not.)

They clearly estimated what would be required if we did go to war (at least 200,000 troops, preservation of the Iraqi infrastructure, and solid planning for security and economic stability.) They still speak out now to try and convince the Bush Administration that the best way to combat terrorism is by engaging moderate Muslims both here and abroad to foster cooperation and work with the international community to bring legitimacy back to the rule of law.

There is also a group of politicians, policy advisors and members of neo-conservative think tanks within the Bush Administration (Cheney, Rumsfeld, Perle and others) that have given and promoted their best advice. For ten years their stated goal has been to invade Iraq for geopolitical advantage in the Middle East. Their expert advice was that the overthrow of Saddam would be a cake-walk and that planning for the expected post-war chaos was irrelevant. Their idea of combating terrorism is to use force and torture abroad and systematically erode our most basic civil liberties here at home.

It is absolutely clear whose advice George Bush has taken and continues to take. It is just as clear whose advice has embroiled the U.S. in a disastrous foreign war, cost the lives of over a thousand U.S. troops, and serves to inflame the entire Middle East region and foster anti-American sentiment worldwide.

George Bush says he will estay the course and continue to heed the advice of the same small group of extremists who insist our career military and diplomatic experts have it all wrong. On November 2nd we need to support our troops and fire these guys. It is time to change course.

Cynthia McCulloh
Dillon

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