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An Equal Opportunity Employer

Mayor Chris Hart
City Council Members:
Derek Larsen
Sue Gordhammer
Jenny Johnson
Cheyne McDonald
Dennis Mehr

City Manager Dale Coulam

March 17, 2021

Re: Response to Anonymous Letter regarding the Public Works Department

Dear Mayor and City Council:

At the last City Council meeting, some reference was made to an anonymous letter that was addressed to the Mayor and copied to the City Council (attached) suggesting that there are some serious problems in the Public Works Department, first in regards to the purchase and owning of work equipment and second in regards to problems with work ethic among field staff. This memo to the council is in response to this letter.

I will start off this response with stating that all government organizations must deal with some misperception. Since our operations are funded with tax dollars, we understand, that we are held to a higher standard and vigilance from our community. We welcome the scrutiny and any effort that improves our department. Unfortunately, we also must deal with a stereotype regarding government workers and government waste, that is sometimes difficult to overcome, especially when the public is not always aware of the workings of our field operations.

I am not sure how much of concern should be made with an anonymous complaint, as there may be an ulterior motive at work, and it is hard to investigate since you cannot get more information. In the letter, the author says that they have confirmed these facts with the PW Department Office, but no one here in our office has any such conversations, so that statement alone is straying away from verifiable truth.

Culture of Efficiency

The Public Works Department believes in being as efficient as possible to find the most cost-efficient ways to deal with problems and to overcome government inefficiency stereotypes. Although we are not perfect and sometimes have to address occasional issues and problems, I have always felt that our department has been developing and continues to develop a reputation for being different and operating at a higher level. I have received dozens of compliments from the residents of Ivins. They have observed our employees behaving in a manner consistent with our work ethic. At least three times I have heard the compliment paraphrased as: I have lived many places and never seen city employees work so fast and efficiently as Ivins City crews.

I have noticed no slack in the work that is being accomplished by our field crews. It is a unassailable fact that the work is being accomplished and it continues to be done despite the fact that the city has increased in size in the last decade by 45 percent yet the PW department has increased 22 percent, from 9 employees to 11 employees.

This does not mean the PW Department does not have room to improve and we certainly want to be made aware of problems. I emphatically encourage any resident to provide any information that could help us improve even if they feel the need to submit feedback anonymously.

Investigations into Allegations

I did investigate the work ethic allegations having discussions with Shiloh Pentz, the Assistant Public Works Director of Operations and field staff members. From this investigation, it quickly became very clear to me that the allegations were a gross misrepresentation of true facts. I even met with Wilson Jimenez, the City mechanic supervised by the Administration Department that currently occupies a portion of the Public Works building and would be a witness if there were serious problems as described in the letter. He also confirmed to me that he has not observed any problems.

The anonymous author was right when they state that I put a lot of trust in Shiloh Pentz. I have worked with Shiloh now for over thirteen years. He is one of the best co-workers that I have ever worked with. I have observed his loyalty to the City and honesty to be impeccable. I will vigorously disagree with any assertion that he is not performing in his supervisory responsibilities. He is one of the major reasons that we have a successful PW Department.

Possible Misperceptions

Now I would like to provide some examples regarding how easily things might be misperceived by someone in the community.

First, the crew may not always break away immediately from the yard every morning because many times they must be lined out on the work for the day. Having a small crew that covers so many disciplines (water, sewer, storm drain, and streets) that are normally covered by separate departments in larger cities, not to mention that sometimes we take on small improvement projects as well means that it is not always so simple to just kick the crews out the door and let them to get to work. When the work is so diversified, often a morning a strategy needs to be developed so that everyone is on the same page and knows what their responsibilities are for the day.

Even with a day all lined out, things can easily be turned on their head with a water leak somewhere in the system or other similar emergencies. These emergencies mean that they head back to the shop and figure out a revised strategy for the day.

Also, the crew will spend one day a month where the crew will conduct a safety meeting. We call it the Safety Tailgate. In this meeting, a video or serious safety discussion will occur. This meeting is essential to providing a safe, injury free work environment. We have been very fortunate to have very few accidents. The few we have had have always been minor. It really is because of efforts like these that Ivins City has received safety awards from our insurer. And there are other miscellaneous meetings that are needed time to time as well.

The concern about the equipment running in the yard for hours is almost certainly a misunderstanding. For the last several months, as the Council is aware, the crews have been sealing cracks in the asphalt. The crack seal machine can take up to 90 minutes to warm up. Our crews do not just sit and wait for the machine to warm up. Instead they are instructed to go out and prepare the streets by blowing out the cracks with compressed air. I can see, however, that someone who is just observing, may consider that to be wasteful, but it is not, it is essential.

And yes sometimes we may send three or more crew members to a job where there are short periods of times that only one of the crew members has work to do and everyone else needs to wait until they do that job until they can get back to their complimentary responsibilities. In my own observations, I have seen it where the work of that one individual is so exhausting and difficult that other crew members are eager and ready to jump into the hole and give the other crew member a break.

When there is an on-going emergency such as a water line break, we often do not know how many crew members are needed to do the job and sometimes we may err on the side of having more there than needed. You never know, at times, what is going to be dug up out of the ground and the challenges that will come of it. When I personally have observed such activities, that the crew standing above the hole is always looking for ways to be useful and helpful to the one that is in the hole.

I will say that the crew is friendly with each other and our department environment is a positive one where people do enjoy being in each other's company. We do not think it is wise nor prudent to create an environment totally devoid of social interaction. We know that these employees need to work as a team. They need to gel together and trust each other. Having good relationships in the crew is most certainly a positive for our department. We believe that having a closely knit team improves efficiency. But without a doubt, friendly interactions must be monitored and sometimes tamped down. I know for a fact that periodically the crew has been reminded by their supervisor to limit these moments to only a modest reasonable amount.

City-Owned Equipment

Next, I would like to address the concerns with City owned equipment.

Some of our equipment is new and in great shape but some of our equipment is old and requires a lot of maintenance. We have a 29-year-old tractor that pulls our highway mower and a 34-year-old road grader. When we need this equipment there are often problems that must be first fixed, but since the use of this equipment is limited to a handful of times per year and almost never an emergency situation, we are in no rush to replace them.

On the other hand, the equipment we need to use in emergencies must be newer and better equipment, less prone to malfunction. It is so important that our crews have the right tools to do a job efficiently. Anyone that works with their hands or with heavy equipment knows that having the right working tool makes all the difference. When you are paying a crew good wages and benefits to do a job, they should be given the tools to do the job efficiently or they should not be doing the job and instead we should be hiring contractors.

I am open minded about the idea of changing our equipment philosophy if the Council wants to direct us in that manner and I certainly do not want to create the perspective that we are building a kingdom of nice equipment, yet I believe that everyone in the Public Works Department (and the Parks Department too since we share our equipment with them) can tell you that having such equipment has improved our efficiencies and abilities.

Let me give you just one example. Before buying the new ten-wheeled dump truck, we had a problem with a huge pile of concrete, road base, branches and more debris piling up at the yard. Hiring a contractor to remove it was out of the question because it would have cost thousands of dollars to take the multiple loads to the dump.

Last year, we purchased a 2011 ten-wheel dump truck to help us haul asphalt and road base more efficiently. We used to hire this out to contractors because it did not make sense to do it in our smaller dump trucks, but now we can do it ourselves. But rather than take an empty truck to pick up these materials, we will always load it with debris and double task. The pile and big problem are now both gone and to boot we save money on purchasing road base. In one year of having the truck we have saved thousands of dollars and solved a big problem making our yard a better space. That equipment purchase has turned out to be a smart one.

Regarding our backhoe equipment, two years ago, John Deere and Caterpillar decided that the $10,000 per year per backhoe lease options were bad for them and so they raised the prices to $15,000 per year and the leasing option no longer seemed to be a great deal for the City. We put forth a strategy to buy two new backhoes and told the City Council that we would like to trade them back in every two years and achieve a similar annual cost to the City or perhaps even better then $10,000 per year.

As it turns out, we were right. We purchased them for $95,000 each and are trading them back in more than two years later for $75,000 each (unless we can get better deal through auction). The strategy yielded a cost very similar and perhaps even less than the leasing strategy. Please consider that with the fact that since the equipment is under warranty, the equipment has zero maintenance costs, and there are no tire replacements. The tire replacement alone is a $4,000 to 5,000 expense, and since we must drive the backhoes out from the yard to each job site, they end up needing replacements every 4 to 5 years. Any other strategy would have to consider tire replacement as part of the cost.

I will admit, even though I believe the strategy served the City well and turned out to be a prudent and fiscally minded strategy, even better than the leasing program, I dislike the appearance that perhaps it does not seem prudent to others. Even if criticism is unfair, I do not want to create an appearance that the Public Works Department is not being careful with taxpayer money. We are seriously considering different strategies.

Opportunities

We do not claim to be perfect and if there is something that can be done to make us better, we are open to feedback and even criticisms. We always want to improve. We are willing to be held accountable for our actions with a promise to fix it. I do wish that I could sit down with the anonymous author as most of the accusations seem to not fit with my own and others observations, prior compliments, and internal investigations and it simply does not fit with the results we see from the crew completing assignments. I hope they will read this response and if they have some evidence that I am missing, they will provide it to me.

This may, honestly, be turned into a positive opportunity for our Department. First off, it gives me a chance to brag about our crew. I think they deserve some hearty applause and recognition for the hard work that they do. They do a lot of the things that most do not want to do, and they do it with a great attitude.

And second, it is a reminder that there are residents out there that care about their City, even if some perceived problems are more perception than reality. We do need to be careful in how we present ourselves to the City as we travel around the City in City owned equipment. We need to be careful, cautious, and respectful to the use of taxpayer funds. This is just another reminder to take these things very seriously.

Thank you, Mayor and Council, for your support and consideration. Please know that I would love to receive any feedback from you or any residents that have observed objectionable behavior. Again, we believe we are running a great department, but we still want to improve, so do not hesitate to share your opinions, observations, or investigations whether they are positive or negative.

Sincerely,

Charles Gillette, P.E.
Public Works Director and City Engineer

Attachment

February 19, 2021

Dear Mayor Hart,

I listen to the City Council meetings on a regular basis and at the most recent meeting, you addressed concerns about purchasing new backhoes when the ones the City currently has, have very minimal hours. I am a long-time resident of Ivins and a retired Director of Finance for a large construction company. You were not wrong in your concerns of that entire discussion (hours, leasing vs. purchase, maintenance in-house etc.) and I can tell you that there is in fact a sentiment in the Ivins community that the City is building a kingdom of expensive equipment that is not used to the extent of justifying the purchases. There are other and better means of obtaining expensive equipment, like auctions such as Ritchie Brothers, TNT or similar, leasing and renting.

I walk the trail above the animal shelter and yard, several times a day, where this kingdom of equipment is stored and have the opportunity to observe Ivins City employees at the yard. I knew the former Public Works Director Dave Glenn, well. He ran a tight ship – some may even say it was too tight but there is a balance between running a tight ship and not knowing where the ship is going or what is happening on the ship.

I often observe employees who take what appears to be, several breaks during the day, as they are standing around in the yard and appear to be shooting the breeze. I have confirmed with the PW Department – and that was a challenge itself because often they were not in the office during business hours. I have observed PW employees showing up at the arrival time, hanging out in the office for at least an hour before leaving the yard and going to work. This has also been observed during the lunch hour, as well as near quitting time –at least a 1 ½ hour lunch and hanging out in the office more than hour before they are scheduled to go home. I have even been behind them at different drive-throughs during lunch in marked City vehicles, wearing City uniforms-cameras can verify. That would not happen under the former Director. I often observe a 3-4 hour workday, when they're being paid for full hours, plus sick leave, vacation, insurance, and other retirement benefits. That adds up. It is Ivins taxpayers that pays for that.

I often observe 3 or more employees on a single job where 1 person is working, and the others are conversing and equipment running in the yard for hours on end, increasing the hour use, but not working. I understand the need to exercise the equipment and the requirements for certain jobs to have a number of people on-site but those are not what I have observed. I have observed abuse of our tax dollars. Where is the Public Works Director to oversee what's happening? He likely depends on his Supervisor but if that person is part of the problem, which it appears that it is, where is the Supervisors Supervisor? When the current Director Chuck Gillette was pressed by you about the equipment, he said he was "not an equipment guy" and deferred to the PW Supervisor Shiloh. When a department is not communicating as a whole, that's a problem.

You talked about the perception of being a government worker and you're correct, you do not want that for Ivins. People are moving here from all over the Country and we are no longer that quaint small town that goes unnoticed – people notice behaviors of government employees in all aspects and while the job that the City does on our streets is great when the job is done, the residents of Ivins are being short-changed by the hours not being worked by the Public Works employees.

Thank you for your thoughtful insight and discussion. I encourage you and the other Council Members to conduct your own observations. I have encouraged Ivins residents to do the same, so that we improve these things for the future and benefit of Ivins.

CC: City Council Members
St. George News