

Council: City councilors 'are citizens as well'

By CARRIE HADERLIE
Boomerang Staff Writer

One of only two members of the public present at Tuesday night's city council meeting designated for public comment about proposed water rate increases said the general perception is that Laramie's city councilors just don't listen.

"A lot of people have told me that this council won't listen to the people of Laramie — that they just do what they want to do. A lot of people said they'd come to meetings, but that it wouldn't do any good. I hope that is not the way it is. ... I have had no interaction with this council, but I was told by those people that I might as well not waste my time," Nancy Mickelson, Laramie resident, said Tuesday, after questioning the council about rate increases intended to repair city water infrastructure.

Several councilors countered that not only do they listen to the public — they are the public as well.

"I appreciate (people coming and talking). We need to hear this," Councilor Scott Mullner said. "Oftentimes we don't hear enough from the public. We have to make decisions at times in a vacuum."

Mickelson had asked council where the money gathered from water rate increases from 1999-2004 had gone, and asked how her fixed-income, 86-year-old mother would be able to pay for the proposed rate increases.

City Manager Janine Jordan said the rate increases from 1999-2002 were "cost of living" increases and did not raise revenue needed to pay for substantial increases in construction costs for repair over the same time period. Jordan also said that the city offers a rate assistance program for fixed-income residents who meet certain qualifications.

"I am almost certain that we haven't given you the answer you want," Mullner said to Mickelson. "I understand that these bills are very large, with the economy, with the water, with the sewer, with the dump. All of these expenses at the same time are huge expenses to the citizenry. And please remember that we are all citizens as well."

Councilor Karl McCracken said he wished more people would have come to the hearing to comment, and said that he actively listens to citizens he meets in public.

The council voted last week on first reading to approve a four-year rate increase plan to raise funding for a 10-year infrastructure repair plan as proposed by Red Oak consulting. The rate increases will raise \$85 million to pay for infrastructure repair over a 10-year period, if approved on second and third reading. Second reading is scheduled for next Tuesday, and the meeting is open to the public.

As the proposed rate increases are defined in city ordinances, the rate increases will take place over a period of four years, but the council will have to approve the specific rate increase each year during their general budgeting sessions.

McCracken said he would like the rate increases to be voted on as regular agenda items each year.

"Yes, this can be revisited annually, but through the budget process, it is very quick, it is simple, it is easy," McCracken said. "If we do it through the process we are going through now ... it is three readings. It is tough, and I would like it to be tough."

The other member of the public present Tuesday night said he disagreed with the assessment that the current council does not listen to the public.

"I think the present council and also the city staff ... do listen," Laramie resident Robert Waggener said. "No one wants their rates raised. ... But the city infrastructure has been, to my understanding, neglected for many, many years. This council and this city staff inherited a lot of issues with that."

In addition to Mullner and McCracken, councilors Joe Vitale, Dee Mickelson, Klaus Hanson and Bryan Shuster were present. Mayor Jodi Guerin and councilors Joe Shumway and Erik Molvar were absent.

During a special meeting just before the work session, the councilors set a public hearing on community development block grant (CDBG) funding available through Wyoming Business Council for 6:30 p.m. Tuesday. The Wyoming Business Council administers the CDBG funds for economic and community development projects, and its board of directors approves grant recipients.

Only cities and towns are eligible to apply for CDBG funds. However, local governments can apply on behalf of other groups, for the funding. The City of Laramie is applying for a CDBG award to help fund installation of a secondary water line to serve southern Laramie.

A follow-up story on landfill improvements/options as presented by Trihydro Corporation will appear in Thursday's Boomerang. For more information about the water and waste water rate increases, visit the city's Web site at cityoflaramie.com.

Carrie Haderlie's e-mail address is lbedit11@laramieboomerang.com