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Landfill concerns throw wrench in 6th-penny process

A councilman wants a plan to expand the existing landfill to be included among the projects that could go before voters.

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CHEYENNE n The sixth-penny sales tax ballot process is "out of control" and should start over, City Councilman Jim Brown says.

The amount of money that local leaders are considering asking voters to approve is way too high, he adds.

His comments come as a countywide committee is finalizing a list of projects to put before voters in the Aug. 21 election.

Moreover, Brown said, a critical landfill expansion is not even being considered for the city's list, while other less important needs are proposed.

"I really think the landfill should be the No. 1 issue on the sixth-penny ballot," Brown said.

The plan is to expand the existing Happy Jack Landfill, which is located about 10 miles west of town.

City resident Mary Sieh agreed that the landfill is an important project, saying the city needs a place to put the trash.

But Council President Patrick Collins said the sixth penny is the wrong way to pay for landfill expansion. He represents the city on the countywide panel developing the list of projects for the ballot.

The landfill can pay for itself through garbage and recycling collection fees, Collins said. Moreover, grants, loans and bonds also could help pay for the project, he added.

He said the city spends about \$2.5 million a year to haul and dump its garbage at a landfill in Ault, Colo. That revenue will be freed up to finance the landfill expansion, he added.

But Brown said paying off bonds and loans for the project could cause customer rate hikes ranging from 17 to 50 percent.

Collins disagreed, saying he does not think increases would be required.

The city could secure state loans with interest rates ranging from 2.5 to 4.5 percent and bonds from 3 to 4.5 percent, Collins said.

But the sixth penny would pay for the project with cash in three and a half years rather than the city going into debt for 20 to 25 years and paying interest, Brown said.

Collins responded that putting the landfill on the sixth-penny list would require other projects to be taken off.

Brown voted in favor of a resolution listing the projects that the city would like on the ballot. The landfill was not among them.

But Brown said he now regrets not putting the landfill on the list.

The city has procrastinated for years on getting the project done, Brown said. Once it is complete, it will take care of the problem for 30 to 40 years.

Collins said the landfill should not take up space on the ballot when there are other means of paying for it. Other projects, such as a public safety building and a recreation center, are better for the sixth penny because they do not have their own revenue streams, he added.

But Brown said there are too many projects on the ballot. He said the initial plan was to keep the total for all government entities in the county at \$100 million. That way the projects could be paid off in five years. But now the draft ballot totals \$185.6 million.

Brown said he still thinks there is a chance for the city to add the landfill and cut less critical needs.

Currently, the city has \$105.7 million worth of projects, and Brown said that should be knocked down to about \$57.5 million.

"The list we have now has to go away," Brown said.

Collins agreed that the large number of projects presents problems. If they all pass, he said, it will take 11 years to collect the money.

This means some projects, such as the \$33 million recreation center, would not be able to start construction for seven to nine years. This delay creates problems because inflation could hike the cost \$10 million, Collins said.

But as the city's representative on the committee, Collins said he must stand by the council's position of putting all the projects on the ballot.

It is unclear if all the projects will make it to the final list. The countywide sixth-penny committee is still working on the ballot.

Made up of representatives from the city, Laramie County and the towns of Albin, Burns and Pine Bluffs, the committee meets at 5:30 p.m. today at the Burns-Plex in Burns.

The landfill project is expected to cost \$30 million, though \$3 million of that is for new equipment, which is among current sixth-penny proposals. The rest of the cost is \$21 million for landfill construction and \$6 million for improvements to the solid waste transfer station.

By hauling its trash to the landfill in Ault, Colo., the city is preserving the final two and a half years of space in its landfill.

Brown said the city is contractually obligated to haul its garbage to Ault for the next four years. But the plan would be to have the expansion done at the same time that contract ends.

In addition to the problems that bonds and loans pose to customers' rates, Brown said the city's bonding capacity is only \$20.9 million, short of what is needed to pay for landfill construction and transfer station.

Collins responded that if the city does not have enough bonding capacity, it could form a joint powers board with the county or other governmental entity to secure added capacity.