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## Upgrades, please

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ALBIN - When a car drives through downtown Albin, old men look up to name the driver and surmise where he's going. Some wave; it is the courteous thing to do.



Albin town clerk, Debbie Tilley, and maintenance and water operator Ron Sorensen discusses some of the challenges they face trying to keep their small town running.

That's how it is in this town of 120 people. Local officials say it's time to make a few upgrades here.

They would like to stop having to burn trash, own a road grader that works, have a shop to house all city vehicles, replace sewer lines and restore an empty high-school building.

The Albin Town Council has asked its clerk, Debbie Tilley, to drive 120 miles, round trip, in the city's van every week to Cheyenne to represent the town and to negotiate for their town's share of the sixth-penny sales tax pie.

Right now, the grand total for the list of projects - from Cheyenne, Laramie County, Pine Bluffs, the Cheyenne Regional Airport, Burns and Albin - is at \$148 million.

Like many who engage in the small town where they live, Tilley isn't a one-career woman. She functions as the city clerk, city treasurer, activities planner, community center director, water tester and notary public.

And she cooks the noontime meal at the community center. Her southern-style fried chicken will draw as many as 75 for lunch.

State sales tax is 4 percent. Wyoming law allows counties to ask voters to allow another percentage for roads and another percentage for specific projects.

In 2006, Laramie County voters renewed the fifth-penny sales tax, which is a road tax. In 2003, they approved a \$57.9 million sixth-penny sales tax that includes the new central library.

The current list of projects includes a \$50 million recreation center for Cheyenne and \$51.1 million to build a public works shop and infrastructure on the Archer Complex for the county.

But it's early in the process. The election is tentatively set for May 8.

First, the committee must come up with a final list of projects. Then the governing bodies must agree on what goes on the ballot.

Right now, Albin's projects total \$2.5 million. The town's budget this year is \$210,000.

Here are Albin's proposed projects for the ballot:

Garbage truck, trash bins \$750,000

Wisps of smoke scented breezes around town on Thursday. That's because someone, somewhere, in Albin was burning garbage. That, in most places, is an illegal activity. But here, steel barrels line the streets and alleyways. People put their garbage into the barrels - no recycling, everything goes in - and burn it.

Every Tuesday, Ron Sorensen, the town's maintenance and water operator, collects the ashes and other non-rendered remains, like kitty litter and empty pickle jars.

He hoists the barrels himself and empties them into a trash truck. Then he drives the load to the landfill north of Burns. One of the job hazards is last-minute torch jobs.

"Sometimes I take my glove off and stick my hand in (the barrel) and see if it's warm," Sorenson said.

Otherwise, the smoldering load will become a bed of flames.

When Tilley moved here from Texas a few years ago, she found Albin's antiquated refuse system astonishing. She was "freaked out."

She cited the number of times she's stood over her barrel, trying to coax a flame into a bonfire.

Sometimes, the flames get away from her. She has singed her hair doing it. Once she even set her front yard on fire.

With the \$750,000, the town would buy new trash containers and a larger garbage truck with a mechanical lift and compressor.

On average, \$30 will pay your garbage, sewer and water bill in Albin. If the city paid for the truck and trash bins with user fees instead of the sixth penny, that would be too large a burden for the residents, Tilley said.

Or at least by the time the truck was paid off, it would be time to trade it in, she added. This upgrade will be safer and beautify the town, she added. "It's one of my pet peeves," she said. "I want this real bad."

Road grader \$250,000

The town relies on a 30-year-old yellow machine's single blade to make the streets drivable in Albin. It shapes and smoothes the gravel, and it plows snow.

When the white stuff collects, Sorensen's shift starts at 2 a.m. He has roughly 30 city blocks to plow, as well as the fire station and the schoolyard. He works in the cold because the heater is broken.

"It breaks down every day," Tilley said. "Oh no, we're not exaggerating. That's how you stop."

The brakes don't work. But there is an alternative to waiting for a breakdown. Sorensen lets the blade drop to the ground. "We can't even get insurance (other than liability) on it anymore," Tilley said.

This fall the town is on track to lease a new road grader from Caterpillar, which will include an attachment for a snowplow.

If the town's portion of the sixth-penny ballot passes, it will buy it. If the vote fails, it would just continue the

lease.

Activity center \$250,000

In 2002, Laramie County School District 2 voted to shut down Albin High School, a decision that didn't go over well with the town's residents. So far their efforts to revive it by turning it into a charter school have failed.

Last year, the city offered to buy the building for \$10. The school board has tabled a decision.

The board had said if the town wanted to apply for a grant, it should alert them, said LCSD2 Superintendent Margie Simineo. The board would then consider submitting a letter indicating they would be willing to work with the town to obtain the building.

In the meantime, it's in disrepair, and it has to be brought up to code. LSCD2's long-term plan for the building is demolition.

"I doubt that would happen anytime soon," Simineo said. "Lately, the state School Facilities Commission has been using funds to build schools instead of tearing them down."

About a year ago, the Albin Economic Development Committee unveiled a strategy to turn the building into a cultural and business center. An engineer said refurbishing it and getting it up to code would exceed \$1 million.

That plan is on the back burner for now, said Lisa Bowman, who co-chairs the committee. Right now, they are trying to raise money for the endowment fund, which will create a pot of money that can be used to issue small grants.

Most recently, one of the Town Council members asked Tilley to put the school on the sixth-penny ballot list, she said. But she shook her head when asked for his name. She would get in trouble for that, she said.

But, she was told, this is his chance to pitch his plan to the county. "There is no plan," Tilley said. But nine of 10 voters here would get behind getting money to save the school, she added. "It would be nice to save it," she said. "It's a beautiful old building." So for now, there's the title of the project - activity center - and a request for \$250,000.

Street repair \$500,000

The only paved road for the town's denizens runs right down the center of downtown, and that's a state highway. The rest of the town has gravel roads.

Tilley says town officials would like to start by paving a couple of streets and rebuild the gravel roads.

New maintenance shop \$300,000

A metal building on the east side of town stores the road grader. Parked on a gravel lot are the city's trash truck and the dump truck. The new shop would be a place to store all the vehicles and perform maintenance work.

Sewer line work \$500,000

The sewer lines here are old and crumbling. They are the old-fashioned type, made of clay, and they have been running under the streets since who-knows-when, Sorensen said. Tree roots exacerbate the problem, which have caused a few sewer backup problems. The plan is to replace all them with modern PVC piping.