

For my column this week, I'd like to briefly touch on several different subjects.

Wind Turbine

Again, the wind turbine is temporarily out of operation. In a conversation, I was told that it appeared to be the power converter assembly and depending on availability of parts and staffing would be under repair early this week. In a separate email, the manufacturer gave a less specific explanation, "another issue was identified upon communications restoration." Unfortunately, we continue to work the bugs out of the system, but the turbine is being worked on.

Undercover Boss

There is a reality television show that has a company president or executive secretly take a rank and file position at his or her company. A couple weeks ago I was not undercover, but I did have the chance to work from the pool office for a few days. It proved a great opportunity to see first hand how the pool operates, to observe some of the city's seasonal employees, and to recognize how many families value the pool in our community.

I was proud to see that the high school and college aged staff did a good job overall. They knew their responsibilities, were concerned with the safety of our customers, and were friendly to the customers. They essentially ran the pool without my supervision. For many of them, I am sure the pool is their first work experience. I hope their summer at the pool has been a valuable learning experience for them.

I was also impressed by the system that aquatics director Rick Hamacher had developed. He had daily checklists and reports, forms for practically any incident that may need to be documented at the pool. As a facility regulated by the state, some of these were required for health and safety reasons. But some of the papers ensured adequate and complete training of staff. And checklists were geared to making sure all job duties were performed daily. The landscape of my office at city hall is a mountain range of stacked papers, so I was a bit jealous of the organization of checklists, binders, and files in Rick's office.

I also gained some insight that should help me understand better when discussing pool operations with Rick. And I saw a few areas that may have room to improve the service at the pool for all to enjoy.

City Budget

Monday, September 20, at 6:15 pm, department heads will present their 2011 budget requests to the full Common Council. Previously, the budget requests have only been discussed at the committee level, so this will be the first most see of it.

In July, I gave a general direction that department heads use a 0% increase as the target for their expenditures. But, other than that, I do not know what their budget requests

include. I actually left a meeting of the Public Works Committee early because I wanted them to have their budget discussion by themselves, without my interference. In any case, it will be a tight budget, and hopefully most of the requests come in with that 0% increase.

If everything stays equal, there will be a \$75,000 increase in debt service payments for the infrastructure work done on Highway 14 in 2005. This means somewhere around a 22 to 25 cent per thousand increase in the property tax rate. This is a little more than a 3% increase in the city's tax rate, just to stay even without any other spending increases or new services.

Given the state of the economy, I would very much prefer not to recommend a tax increase of this size. But with the possibility of some cuts in other areas of the budget or maximizing other revenue sources such as paid advertising or fees for service, I think the budget is doable.

But my big budget fear is the State of Wisconsin. The state is facing a structural budget deficit around \$2.5 billion when it starts its next biennium on July 1, 2011. Couple that with the fact that intergovernmental revenues comprise about 29% of the city's general fund, and the city is in a very uncertain position going into the future. The state may make significant cuts to shared revenues in order to balance its budget. And if such cuts are enacted during the city's fiscal year, we will have limited options to react to the lost revenue.

Contracts

Most contracts the city has for various services run on the calendar year, which is also the city's fiscal year. With only a few months left in 2010, several contracts are up for review, renewal, or negotiation.

The city engineer and city attorney have both been on two-year contracts. The city planner has a one-year contract. I expect to recommend the city continue services with all three of these professionals, but some contract details may be different than in the past.

The one-year contract for operation of the youth center appears to be in question. Funding may not be available to maintain the current contracted services. I expect to discuss this in depth with the Youth Center Advisory Board over the next few weeks.

The city has collective bargaining agreements with four unions. All have been three-year contracts, and all are set to expire at the end of this year. Late this month, we will hold an initial meeting with the police officers. The police supervisor contract is awaiting final negotiations on the officers contract. We have not yet set a date for an initial meeting with the union covering the city's clerical, public works, and water and light employees. The Library Board oversees operations of the library and is in negotiations over their contract.