

February 9, 2022

Hiring shortfalls and solutions,

I attended a ZOOM meeting last week concerning racial equity and approaches to policing. The police chief from Jacksonville, NC gave a comprehensive presentation concerning his department's community policing initiatives.

The chief addressed the challenge of recruiting qualified personnel to fill the ranks. He stated that given recent events fewer people are interested in becoming law enforcement officers. He stressed that potential candidates had to have the basic education, at least a high school diploma, to apply. Applicants also have to have the correct psychological and emotional temperament to be an officer. In addition, candidates must have at least average intelligence and be able to pass strenuous psychical requirements. Finally, a prospective officer has to have a clean criminal record free of drug or DWI convictions. If all of these criteria are met, recruits will go through a basic law enforcement training program for six months in order to be certified.

The chief said these requirements made it challenging to recruit and maintain force levels. I talked with our Chief Holland who agreed about the recruiting challenges. She emphasized members of our force participate in continuing education and training programs.

After hearing the presentation, I realized the issue of recruiting and maintaining staff levels for any municipal department is now, more than ever, a challenge. Some of the basic standards for recruiting law enforcement officers apply to hiring all town employees. Employees must have a clean record, and for the most part hold certifications or licensure in their work fields.

All of these factors have rapidly impacted staffing at our sewer plant. Sewer operators must hold operator licenses. We have always met these state requirements. Currently, sewer plant operators are in high demand nationally.

We lost one Level 4 operator who had joined us about three years ago. He recently moved back to an area closer to his family. Another operator went to another municipality, and one worker left our employment. The town vigorously advertised and tried to find replacements.

The last licensed worker who has been with the town for 40 years, Howard Brown, recently announced his retirement. His impending retirement leaves Highlands with no personnel to operate the plant.

We will now enter a 3-year contract with Environmental, Inc. out of Sylva to operate the plant. Their personnel meet all state requirements. Environmental will provide a

licensed operator 5 days a week and have an operator on call after hours. The contract will decrease plant operating costs.

Environmental, Inc. provides the same services to several Western Carolina municipalities. Area municipalities have encountered the same issues in recruiting operators.

During the contract period we will strive to recruit people who could apprentice and become licensed operators. The licensing process to where an employee can operate the plant takes about three years complete.

Congratulations to Howard Brown on retirement and his 40-year service to the town. Howard has been making significant commute to serve Highlands. I know he will enjoy this new chapter in his life.