

Town Retreat
March 8, 2012

Thursday, March 10, is the town retreat at the Presbyterian Church's Coleman Hall. It begins at 9 am, and the public is invited to hear the budget reports and project proposals presented by town staff.

I want to touch several big-ticket items that will be presented. This review illustrates how a few hundred thousand here and there adds up to major budget needs. They are not frivolous expenditures, but essential needs that impact the basic operation of the town.

For instance, over a decade ago the town purchased new state of the art digital utility meters. We went to a digital system rather than relying on a person to manually read each meter every month. These meters are now approaching the end of their functional service and have to be replaced in the coming years. Rather than replacing all the meters at once, we will do a 3-year phased replacement program. One third of the meters will be replaced this year for a cost of \$380,000 dollars.

There is a need to replace a problematic old clay pipe sewer line on Carolina Way. That project is estimated to cost \$222,000.

The town needs to install backup generators to multiple sewer pump stations throughout the town. Having these backup generators is long overdue. The cost to install all the generators for the pumps is \$434,000. That's not a frivolous government expense, but rather a wise investment.

At the sewer plant there is a critical need to replace an aging belt press. The press is used in the final processing of solid waste. The current press was purchased as a used piece of equipment from another municipality several decades ago. A new replacement press will cost \$900,000. There are no longer any used belt press deals out there.

Between road paving and sidewalk projects the town could spend about \$500,000 this year.

There is a need to install water, electric and sewer services on Gibson Road. For decades Gibson has not been developed, but now a number of houses are in process. These new residences will require utility service which is not currently available. This cost is estimated to be around \$608,000. That does not include paving Gibson which would come next year after the utilities have been installed.

At the retreat the board will also hear a report on the cost of replacing the Houston House with a state-of-the-art building designed for children. The new building would house the after-school program that the Highlands Recreation Department operates.

We have several really big-ticket items, namely the replacement of the aging 1965 water clarifier tank at the water plant, and the waterlines and water tank on Dog Mountain. These projects will cost several million dollars. The town's strategy is to apply for federal and state infrastructure grants to fund these major projects. We are already in the process of developing the grant proposals and will be ready to submit them during the application period this spring.