

Subject: Town Staffing  
October 8, 2023

Let me share some thoughts that I have related to town personnel and the challenges ahead. I don't have the final answers to these challenges, and the new board that will be installed in December will have to tackle these issues.

Like almost all businesses now, the Town of Highlands faces a potential worker shortage in the coming months and maybe years. This past year, we have had a number of veteran, highly experienced workers retire. And they did not take early retirement; for the most part, they put in about 30 or more years of service to the town.

The town has to compete in the marketplace for skilled workers. For instance, a worker who has a CDL driver's license is now in very high demand. Local contractors and construction companies are willing to pay a high hourly rate for CDL drivers and heavy equipment operators. The town also has this demand in that we need personnel who hold at least the CDL-B license in all public works areas. For instance, we need all personnel on our sanitation crews to have a CDL to drive our trucks.

Related to this potential worker shortage is how to compete to recruit and retain qualified and experienced workers. Early in the year, the town simply had to increase police salaries across the board because we were losing the retention battle to other municipalities. Our police chief has been working hard to address the problem by her and other officers putting in overtime patrol duty hours while at the same time, she has been actively recruiting new officers. The problem is that potential new officers have to undergo basic law enforcement training before hitting the road. If all goes as planned, we will be back to full staff by the first of the new year.

Getting back to sanitation, we are in a similar situation with a shortage of personnel. How do we solve this recurring problem in the sanitation department? Folks constantly tell me everything would be solved if we went to one-day-a-week residential pickup. Does that translate to cutting the hours of our seven-person sanitation department to 32 hours a week? It's hard enough to recruit sanitation workers for a 40-hour week, much less reducing their time to almost a part-time status. Cutting the number of workers would also be perilous because sanitation workers are frequently sidelined due to on-the-job injuries, which adds to the shortage of staff.

Others have suggested privatizing the sanitation department. That could also be problematic because Highlands is a very small, isolated market. A company could operate here for a few years and then decide to leave. Getting back into the sanitation business would be both difficult and expensive. There might not be any replacement providers, and it would be tremendously expensive to get back into the market considering equipment acquisition, personnel recruiting, and reestablishing management and operations. The long-term solution is to increase worker compensation, which could mean rate increases. Currently, residential service is \$20 a month for eight pickups. Honestly, we spend a whole lot more money on other services and conveniences here on the plateau and think nothing about it. Garbage removal and transporting it to a distance landfill over the mountains is an expensive proposition, but the alternatives seem more so.

The new town board will present the results of a salary study that an outside agency has conducted for the town this fall. Those results will help inform the board on how and where to address the problem areas I have described. The study might reveal other areas to address.