Thursday is the Town of Highlands Retreat. It starts at 9 a.m. at the Recreation Center in the Arts and Crafts room and will go on until about 3:30 or 4 p.m. The public is invited to hear staff reports and the ensuing discussions between commissioners and staff. This annual retreat's primary purpose is to begin developing a town budget for the forthcoming fiscal year.

Each department head will make a presentation to the board concerning department needs and priorities for fiscal year 2025/2026. The reports made at this retreat are the first step in finalizing a budget. The final vote to approve a balanced budget will be taken at the June meeting of the Highlands Board of Commissioners after a public hearing has been held.

In the interim, a series of afternoon budget workshops will be held as part of the process of refining the final budget. At this current retreat, the department presentations might be characterized as wish lists of important future needs. Not all items will be funded in this upcoming budget.

The retreat will begin with a mid-year update of the town's final position.  The town manager and financial director will inform the board where we stand with executing the current budget.  Budget amendments, as always, will have to be made.  Due to unanticipated expenses, it is virtually impossible not to need to amend the budget during the year. Something always breaks down, or some unanticipated expenditure pops up.  To get through a budget year without a budget amendment would be comparable to picking a perfect bracket in March Madness; it simply hasn’t happened.

After the budget update, Tyler Trantham will be making a presentation concerning a mobile town app. This app could send residents instant messages concerning any local problem or development.  Also, the town is in the process of working with CivicPlus to redevelop the town website.  The website will also put out current announcements and information.  I anticipate these two platforms being available sometime in the spring.

The board will also hear a report from our public works director, Lamar Nix. He always identifies major ticket items for the upcoming budget. Paving will need to be done, utilities will need to be upgraded, and major pieces of equipment will need to be purchased.

We will also hear reports from our police and fire departments that new equipment and vehicles need to be acquired. I frequently ask why we have to replace a police vehicle or fire truck, only to be reminded that I have been mayor for 12 years, and the vehicle being referred to was purchased before I was mayor. Our priority is always to have vehicles able to respond in an emergency, and it is time to replace old vehicles with over a hundred thousand miles on them.

Parks and recreation and IT/GIS will also present their needs for the year. Equipment replacement and maintenance are always needed in these areas.

I will bring up two items at the retreat. One is what to do with the Playhouse building. Last year, an architecture firm specializing in historic restoration did a study and made a conservative estimate that rebuilding the Playhouse would cost 2.6 million dollars. It is time to make a decision.

Also, I will lead a discussion concerning parking on South 4th Street.  Currently we have a section of diagonal parking that some folks believe creates a safety hazard on that section of 4th.  The decision will be whether to keep the parking as is or convert the diagonal parking to parallel parking like what is on the opposite side of the street.  Such a plan would result in the loss of some parking spaces but would improve the safety of that area.