

Dispatches from DeFuniak



From Councilman Ron Kelley

D E F U N I A K S P R I N G S F L O R I D A

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- Snowbird Day, January 18 at Mainstreet offices, Baldwin Avenue
- Florida Chautauqua Assembly in DeFuniak Springs, February 25-28



THE YEAR'S END!

We are told that the Chinese, when placing a curse upon someone, often say “May you live in interesting times.” (As opposed to times of calm, quiet serenity.)

For the DeFuniak Springs City Council, 2017 certainly has been interesting. We lost an excellent city manager, Tilman Mears, who was driven away by two elected officials and their followers.

Later, the city finance director suddenly fled and we soon discovered that over a two-year period, he and at least one of those elected officials had also conspired to keep news of critically important financial deadlines away from the Council. This eventually caused the city to miss receiving \$220,000 in state revenues.

The Council also discovered that it was much farther behind in our annual audit schedule than we had been led to believe. The Council hired an independent auditing firm to help bring the books up to date. That was great but the process is still

ongoing.

The Council also rehired two former police officers after a mediation judge ruled against the city marshal’s handling of their termination. The rehiring also included back pay and benefits.

Then there was the CR-280 connector road, which the DOT ‘giveth and then taketh away’ under somewhat irregular circumstances.

Oh yes, it has been an interesting time in the old town.

However, there have been some excellent moments, too! The voters returned former Councilman Wayne Graham to the Council. Honest and straightforward, Mr. Graham is a welcome addition.

During the period following the departure of Mr. Mears, our Public Works Director Craig Drake stepped up and took over as interim city manager. Craig demonstrated why he is popular with the staff and public alike. He consistently displayed excellent leadership skills and worked well with

all Council members.

Finance Supervisor Morgan Hulion, who was hired after the finance director left, also stepped up to the plate and assumed the leadership role in that department. She continues to do an extraordinary job and her work ethic is amazing.

The Council launched the Main Street program to help revitalize downtown and also relocated the Chamber of Commerce office to the Heritage Museum building.

Finally, many of our staff have had to wear multiple hats this year and everyone not only did so, but they did it without complaint. Citizens have every right to be proud of their city employees. The staff and crew members remain our greatest asset.

Despite living in interesting times, there are lots of good days ahead. I hope that in 2018, we can we all live in calm, quiet serenity.

— Ron Kelley
December 28, 2017

NEITHER A LENDER OR BORROWER BE

The Council took action to clarify and finalized a city policy involving the use of city equipment being removed from city property to be used, borrowed or rented by private individuals and/or organizations.

City Attorney Clayton Adkinson researched the question at length and recommended that the Council *not* allow city equipment



to be used for anything other than city-sponsored events at city facilities. A second part of the policy dealt with the use of city employees on private property. City Attorney Adkinson also recommended against that provision, too. The Council formally approved both of the recommendations.

Drowning in Deficient Data

At the last regular City Council meeting in early December, City Manager Danny Lucas presented figures relating to city water/sewer rates, usage and water loss. Much of what was presented was outdated or simply incorrect. This erroneous information was then repeated by local media outlets, which created even more controversy.

Here are the facts: For some reason, Mr. Lucas apparently did not consult with Assistant City Manager Craig Drake, Finance Supervisor Morgan Hurlion, or Water Department Supervisor Kenneth Gavins before presenting his figures. Instead, he simply presented an old rate study created by the Florida Rural Water Association, that was based on records from 2015.

Mr. Lucas' presentation included comparisons to seven cities with similar population figures. However, some of the figures were incorrect, including the rates for DeFuniak.

While still higher, the DeFuniak Springs rates were not as high as he reported, while Valparaiso and Live Oak rates were reported as lower than they really are.

Further, Lucas reported an unaccounted water loss of 30 percent, which would be catastrophic. However, according to a study in March by Public Works and CH2M Inc., the highest percentage of water loss reported in the last decade was actually in 2014 and was calculated to be 20.4 percent.



That loss was due to several crucial water line breaks, which also required flushing after the installation of new lines.

The most current figure for water loss is only 12.3 percent, far below the 30-percent loss Lucas reported.

Historically, over several decades, water lines that should have been repaired or replaced with larger lines may not have

been prioritized as they should have been. This includes some very old ceramic pipes, which are crumbling and adding to the annual water loss.

Repairing, replacing and upgrading citywide is a very costly procedure, which is probably why it was not done much, except in emer-

is important to remember that city governments are not the same.

DeFuniak Springs only receives about 10 percent of its operating revenues from ad valorem property taxes. The Council has for over a decade kept its ad valorem tax millage rate at 4.5 mils, out of a possible 10 mils.

Other cities with a higher property tax base or higher millage rates may receive a much higher influx of revenues and thus be able to charge much lower utility rates.

One of the reasons the Council increased the water rates and not the property taxes was that city water is also used by renters and businesses, as well as property owners. It affects all city water and sewer users, instead of just land owners.

While no one likes to pay more for anything, paying for what you are using rather than for what you own seems more equitable. What you pay is based on what you use. Further, since that money is being reinvested in the system to prepare for new growth and development, it seems like the best and most worthwhile use of the revenues.

If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant; if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.

- Anne D. Bradstreet

The Year In Pictures



HAPPY NEW YEAR!