



## Guest Opinion: Higher fees, taxes and surcharges coming

By Shaun Moran

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Our city is overspending. On Jan. 2, the Ashland City Council and mayor agreed to hire and fund two police officers, which makes four new police hires since the latest budget was adopted this past June. Despite the Ashland Budget Committee voting against funding additional officers with property tax hikes and increased utility charges, the mayor and council decided to pay for one officer with an increase in Ashland property tax and the other three with a \$2.50 monthly surcharge on utility bills set to start July 2018.

Lacking any prioritization, vision or strategy the council discussed several short-term funding ideas for the additional police staff, all of which included either increased surcharges, higher taxes or more fees on the citizens of Ashland. Yes, there were two city councilors who said we shouldn't add to utility costs, which is admirable, yet considering the city has been looking into police staffing since 2016, I find it incredible that there were no actionable ideas presented by anyone from the city to self-fund the hires or cut costs to offset these additional expenditures.

The mayor urged the council find a solution for police officer funding because he said the city was facing a \$1.7 million general fund deficit. However, the actual figure is a \$2.4 million deficit, highlighted on pages 3-6 of the budget, which the council will need to address during this budget cycle. What this means in its simplest form is our city is overspending. Expenditures are outpacing revenues by over \$1 million a year. This can't continue. The Ashland city budget has increased more than 50 percent over the past eight years. Based on what we have seen over the past few budget cycles, it would not be surprising for the mayor and council to vote again for higher fees, surcharges and taxes to fund any new expenditures. What would be refreshing is to see our elected representatives do the hard work of prioritizing spending and self-funding to better reflect the people and projects essential to the future of Ashland.

In June, I was one of several citizen members of the budget committee who called out the city for its unfettered spending and advocated for fiscal constraint. We were politely ignored. We did present to the mayor and council at least six options to consolidate city operations and departments which would have reduced costs but these ideas were scoffed at as "crazy" and

unacceptable. As a result no substantive cost-cutting measures were considered or adopted.

Ashlanders are generous, socially conscious and proud, and we need our politicians to manage taxpayer funds like they would their own. The 2019 general fund budget is projecting a \$5 million deficit and the 2021 budget based on current spending trends will have a \$10 million deficit with no spending cuts in sight. Our city is clearly on a dangerous fiscal path.

I have been unrelenting in my efforts to call out the lack of fiscal transparency and wasteful spending in our city. How can our city government justify raising our taxes and adding fees for essential city services because they can't find the necessary funds, yet somehow budget \$80,000 for an outside consultant to make conceptual models for a potential \$15 million new City Hall Mega Complex we arguably don't need nor can afford? I stand by what I said before, and that is: I have learned that when our City Council members can't make a decision they often revert to studies or consultants and try to offload decision-making responsibility to an outside entity at taxpayer expense. This time it will be \$80,000. Things need to change.

If things don't change, Ashland is in store for a real fiscal crisis. We need to become more attentive to what is happening in our city, especially as we approach the mid-term city elections in November. We all must demand that our city government become more fiscally accountable and start prioritizing how our tax dollars are spent or our families and our city will suffer.

— *Shaun Moran is a member of the Ashland Citizens' Budget Committee.*



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