



Town hall highlights: Douglas

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By Matt Wojcik, Town Administrator

In the human experience that we all share, many of us have the “Uncle.” He’s the Guy who knows everything about everything. The Uncle insists his way is the shortest. He always gets the cheapest prices. Uncle is always glad to supervise. There is a theory, a story, a put-down for any situation that makes Uncle the wisest, most capable person involved.

In my childhood, I had the Uncle who always showed up with a twelve-inch chain saw. Used less gas, he’d say. Smaller chain took less time and effort to sharpen. And for crying out loud, it’s lighter, so it’s easier to work with. You never need to use anything else.

The trouble, of course, was that we cut trees that were often twenty-four inches across. There was Uncle, tiny saw screaming in the summer heat, trying to prove himself. The saw labored, the blade would dull quickly and often his bar got pinched by logs that were too big and heavy for his All Powerful Mini Saw. A day’s work turned into two.

One serious take on this is that we can’t roll our eyes and ignore the danger of Unclethink when it comes to government. One should never lose sight of the entire project, from beginning to end.

The bottom line for municipal government that people can afford over the long run involves planning and execution against a single goal: stability. It’s easy to put off important projects until something breaks – but what is the total cost in the end? Shouldn’t one fix a leaking pipe before it rots out the floor?

The Town of Douglas is using long range budget planning tools to eliminate penny wise, pound foolish practices and get ahead of, or prevent, those items that inflate the cost of government unnecessarily. Here are some of the key ideas.

Municipalities should avoid debt whenever possible. Interest benefits only lenders – but adds huge sums to the total cost of a project. When incurred, it should be reviewed periodically to see if refinancing under better terms might save taxpayers money.

Unexpected windfalls – including grants – should finance initiatives that reduce operating costs or enhance service levels at no cost. Energy efficiency projects, which may not seem to make sense when energy is cheap, help protect the Town from unpredictable but inevitable cost spikes.

And then, of course, we should make sure we have the right tools for the job. Workplace injuries cause more harm – from loss of time, increased insurance premiums and long-term payments for the worst accidents – than many realize. Training, safety-minded protocols and targeted investments in necessary tools that minimize lifting, carrying, and other risk exposures are all part of responsible stewardship of municipal services.

Municipal government provides a full range of services that no one uses all the time, but anyone might need at any given time. Having a plan that addresses reasonably foreseeable events is one key step toward making choices that are the best deal in the long run.

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