

When Options Are Limited, Hard Choices Must Be Made

By Bob Barrett,

We are about three years into this economic downturn, with few signs of recovery in sight. I'm proud that Peoria has made it this far without reducing core services or boosting fees. Whether that can continue is an open question, one that will hang over the mid-April City Council hearings on next year's budget.

City officials have worked hard to keep the budget in the black in spite of declining revenue. We've reorganized departments and streamlined operations so that Peoria works more efficiently. We slashed the number of vehicles in the city's fleet. We've identified the core services Peoria provides and made them a top priority. And we've embraced energy efficiency in a big way, reducing our utility bills and even earning some rebates.

Most of these changes have occurred behind the scenes, so you might not have noticed. Our libraries remain open; our parks are well maintained; and we still have fireworks on the Fourth of July. Most importantly, our dedicated police and fire personnel continue to respond quickly when you dial 911.

Yet we're doing all that with fewer people. Peoria has eliminated 125 jobs over three years, reducing the city's work force by almost 10 percent. That wasn't easy. In addition to identifying and eliminating non-essential jobs, we offered some retirement incentives and buyouts. But there is a tradeoff there. The employees who retire or accept voluntary-separation packages tend to be among the most experienced and enterprising folks in the city's work force.

At the same time, we're spending less on consultants and independent contractors. The city employees who remain have taken on increased workloads and done so with fewer resources than they had in the past – without additional pay.

Tough Political Decisions

There is only so much "fat" that you can cut in a municipal budget. Providing those core services requires a certain amount of revenue. It's simply the price we pay for having a civil society.

We're at the point now where we must decide whether to cut into the lean meat of the organization or raise new revenue to nourish it. There is no "right" answer. Different folks have different priorities. And deciding how to proceed is politics at its purest.

Which brings me back to those budget hearings.

Like most cities, Peoria plans its budget over the fiscal year, which runs six months ahead of the calendar year. That means city officials are busy planning for fiscal 2012, which starts July 1. In mid-April, the city-management team will present its ideas for keeping the city running in the black. But those are

just recommendations. It is up to the City Council to debate the hard policy options and decide how to move forward. That is what you elected us to do.

As Peoria residents, you can choose to have a role as well. Take the time to watch the presentations and debates. Like City Council meetings, they not only are open to the public but also televised live and on demand by Peoria Channel 11. (Available to Cox cable subscribers and online at www.peoriaaz.gov/channel11.)

If you feel strongly about something you see during the hearings, you still have time to contact your City Councilmember and make those feelings known before the budget is adopted.

###

Not sure who represents you on City Council? You can determine your district at www.peoriaaz.gov/councilmap. Then visit www.peoriaaz.gov/council to identify and contact your councilmember.