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To: CityRecorder
Subject: Comments to Salem City Council for Sept 9, 2024

These comments relate to the budget woes and proposed steps to resolving it.

While well motivated, I believe that the plans to conduct a poll to determine priorities of citizens and doing an audit to verify that our spending is efficient are both unnecessary. They do not answer the right questions or build trust.

The vote for a workers tax was positioned under the Safe Salem program to pay for emergency services. I am confident without a poll that emergency services are a high priority for the majority of citizens in our community. Yet the measure failed miserably. Why?

Of course, for many of us our first reaction to such a measure will be emotional. We feel the dread of another bill on top of bills that are already a burden. Frustration, anger and detail follow. I believe that for most of us we next come to the question of what happened to all our tax dollars we all ready paid.

It is not a question of whether the stated need is important, it's why what we gave isn't being used to pay for those important things. And it is not a question of whether we are spending efficiently, getting the best cost-to-value ratio for the things we buy, but whether we are spending on things that are actually important to us - that are needed or wanted.

From my own experiences, I am also confident that most of us are sure that whatever our government is spending on, it includes a bunch of things that are not a priority to us or are not even things that we want to be spending on. An efficiency poll cannot possibly assure us or build trust because it doesn't address our skepticism about current spending. "Why do you need money for the most important stuff? Why didn't you pay for that first and what did you waste the money you had on?"

Thus, I believe that both the priorities poll and the efficiency study are a waste of time, energy and money.

My observation is also that our communication between the city and the citizens is rather poor. Communication is not about what is said, it is about what is heard. It is about where the audience is, not where the speaker has been.

It has long been my observation in companies that management and teams formed to solve problems tend to work in depth with a problem and evolve through all the details. We study the problem and the causes, brainstorm for possible solutions and dwell over the pros and cons. Then after having assimilated all this and coming to the best solution, we turn to the rest of the company and announce that we will be having a forced shutdown over the Christmas holidays and everybody freaks out. Why? Because all the employees, the rest of the company, weren't on that journey. We didn't all take that journey and adjust over time to the resolution. So, as those who do take that journey, we are left with the responsibility of bringing others along so the plan isn't a crushing blow. It's about communication and letting people go through some of the process of "why not?..." and "what if?..." and, most of all, "why me?..."

There's a great story of a CEO of a major corporation who was faced with a problem and knew fully what the solution was. But, it was a big change. So, he gathered his senior managers and launched them on a process of finding a solution. Six months later, after a great deal of effort and expense, the team came to the solution the CEO knew was needed. In an interview discussion the case, he was asked why he spent six months and all that effort having them come to the solution he already knew was needed. He answered it was because he needed his management team vested in the effort it would take to implement the solution.

So, if you want us to give more tax dollars. Verify to yourselves and to us that you aren't spending on anything that can be cut. Then give the effort to good communications. Find out where the people are and answer our questions. Take the time to help us go through a bit of a process and evolve or at least acquiesce. And then let's talk about who is going to pay what to make it happen.

Greg Macdonald