

MISGUIDED COUNCILMAN CLOGS WATER PLANT PLANS

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Coeur d'Alene's plans for a \$36 million upgrade to its wastewater treatment plant took a strange turn when a lone City Council member decided he knew more about the Idaho Constitution and the environmental challenges cities face removing phosphorus from the Spokane River.

Councilman **Steve Adams** was on board with the upgrades until last month, when he announced that the city's funding plan was unconstitutional. He then leveled a threat to delay the project for up to a year, forcing the City Council to put the project to a vote May 21.

The irony is that this anti-government ideologue's antics will end up costing taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars to stage and promote the election, and potentially millions more if the voters say no. This is what happens when officeholders try to dismantle government, rather than run it. Coeur d'Alene is one of several cities mandated to deal with the dissolved oxygen issue at Long Lake, which serves as a catch basin for the phosphorus in the Spokane River. Phosphorus causes excessive algae blooms, which rob the water of oxygen, thereby suffocating fish. Whether all forms of phosphorus act this way is a matter of scientific dispute, but under the federal Clean Water Act communities and other dischargers must mitigate the overall effects. (One of the dischargers is the Inland Empire Paper Co., which is owned by Cowles Co., which also owns The Spokesman-Review.)

Last year, Spokane County brought online a state-of-the-art treatment facility. To upgrade their wastewater plants, Post Falls and Hayden are following the same process - **judicial confirmation** - that Coeur d'Alene intended to pursue.

Under the Idaho Constitution, the funding for municipal projects deemed "ordinary and necessary" does not have to be put to a public vote. A judge makes the determination. Previous upgrades have been financed this way, but **Adams** declared that he will appeal any green-light decision, which could effectively delay the project for up to a year, city officials say.

So the council decided Thursday that it would be quicker and potentially cheaper to put the project up for a vote. The cost of the election could go as high as \$75,000. If the voters say no, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency could impose hefty ongoing fines for the city's noncompliance.

For the first phase of the upgrade, the city planned to secure a loan from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality for \$7.7 million at an interest rate of 2 percent. That rate is likely to rise to 2.5 percent if the city has to wait until next year, which is what makes **Adams'** threat to file an appeal so costly. A proposed bond issue with an interest rate of 3.24 percent would finance the rest.

Another option would be for the city to finance the project by hiking water rates over the next five years, potentially raising the typical residential bill from \$24 to \$70 a month.

Anti-government extremists are rallying around **Adams**, urging him to stick to his principles. If he does, he'll be sticking it to the rest of the people he was elected to represent.

