

And if you thought the smell was coming from the sewage treatment plant...

Contributed by William Trent
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Now hear this There is a rumor floating around that the upper echelons of Trenton's city government are in line to receive pay increases now that the AFSCME contract negotiations are completed. This would mean a raise for the various Department Heads and Directors, the Chief of Staff and, one would assume, the Mayor.

If this rumor is true, every hard working, tax-paying citizen of Trenton should scream "NO!" at the top of his or her voices.

It seems unconscionable and irresponsible to give yourself a raise when the city is staring at significant debt in this fiscal year.

With the Police and Fire union contracts some three years past due, it is insulting that the chosen few are taking a heaping handful more money for themselves before taking care of the business at hand.

The parameters and measurements used to determine that raises are warranted and affordable need to be publicized and fully explained.

No doubt Mr. Palmer, through Chief of Staff Renee Haynes, will issue some sort of statement about how this is but the equivalent of a cost of living increase (prices have gone up for everyone, haven't they?). There will be an attempt to make critics feel bad because these people have not had raises in "x-amount" of years. Moreover, we will be offered those golden oldies, "this brings the salaries into line with those of similarly sized cities" and "this keeps Trenton competitive so that we can continue to bring the best and the brightest to work here."

OK. We have had "the best and the brightest" and they ultimately leave...not for the money. Usually it is for "personal" reasons...code for I cannot deal with this administration and am good enough to be able to land a decent job elsewhere.

We are no way suggesting people should not earn a decent living commensurate with their job responsibilities and expertise, but let's get real here. If Mr. Palmer and his cabinet were doing such a bang up job of running this city, would we be in such a fiscally weak condition?

Don't think we're that bad off?

Check out Dan Dodson's analysis of the state of the city's budget here.

Or read Greg Forester's explanation of the muddled reasoning being used to promote the sale of the water utility's outlying distribution infrastructure.

Trenton's population is declining; the unemployment rate for city residents is rising. We are the poorest municipality in Mercer County.

We don't have enough money to operate without begging from the state; our library system is broke and may have to cutback on hours of operation; two of our largest unions are working with expired contracts; departments have been told to cut budgets by 10%.

And Directors should get raises?

Uh, no. Not this time.

Readers who were around five years ago may remember a similar move on the part of the administration. This was also a year of budget cuts and fiscal belt tightening. During the end of summer lull one of those Palmer-patented late additions to the Council docket involved two ordinances increasing the pay range for the various Directors, City Clerk, the Mayor and Council themselves.

When the public raised a cry about the issue, we were served up the excuses above plus some story about bringing "parity" to the salary ranges for all cabinet level employees. Despite several people turning up at the council meeting to object, the ordinances both passed.

Here we are five years later and Trenton is deeper in debt. We have squandered hundreds of thousands of dollars fighting the residency issue for the former Police Director. We pay out hundreds of thousands more each year for special legal counsel and other consultants to do the work of city departments. But the Directors of those departments deserve raises?!?!?

And what about the cars?

We have people who live two blocks from city hall who have city cars. We have people who are unqualified for their jobs and who live in North Jersey who have city cars.

How about this counter proposal…no raises this year and no more take home cars?!?!?

Now remember, at this point these proposed raises are only rumored to be in place. However, it certainly feels like a typical move for this administration.

Should it turn out to be true, how will it look for Palmer’s future plans? Didn’t L. A. Parker write that Palmer has his eye on being appointed to head up Senator Obama’s office of Urban Affairs; an office charged with seeing that “federal dollars targeted to urban areas are effectively spent on the highest impact programs.”

It's obvious Doug Palmer manages the city's budget less with an eye towards efficiency or return for dollars spent and more with an attitude of sharing the wealth with the faithful. This is not the man we want running our city let alone overseeing federal spending in urban centers.

If this rumor turns out to be false, good! It would be nice to know that the city's administration is not as underhanded and potentially sneaky as the popular conception would have it appear.

But should the rumor turn out to be true...tar and feathering would be too good for those officials responsible for trying to slip this one by city council and the public.