



Strategic planning meeting gives councilors a chance to set their goals for the city's future

A new public safety building; a new animal shelter; an action plan for community broadband; a replacement airport terminal; water line upgrades; growing the local economy. These are all on the list of strategic infrastructure priorities of the Gallup City Council.

The coronavirus pandemic may have been a tough year for the city of Gallup — like many municipalities across America — but no one can say the mayor and city council members are not ambitious.

“When we run (for public office), we’re promising our constituents this or that. Once you get in council, you realize … ‘can you really pave all of Gallup?’ You cannot,” Councilman Yogash Kumar, Dist. 3, said when he was asked about strategic planning for the city.

During the meetings — which ran March 30 and 31 — city staff, the mayor, and the city council all discussed their one-and five-year priorities virtually with Lyle Sumek Associates, a Florida-based consulting organization that City Manager Maryann Ustick recommended and had worked with on previous jobs.

“We’ve got to have direction and that’s what these sessions do,” Kumar explained.

He acknowledged that these meetings can run long, but “it makes sense to go through this exercise to figure out what is important to all of us together, rather than individual needs.”

By the end of the meeting, Sumek had a document that listed the city’s priorities. Each goal was given a level of priority: top, high, or moderate. These goals were all things the city wants to have done within a year.

The city staff, mayor, and city council also discussed long-term goals that would take more than a year to complete. They want to boost Gallup’s economy, upgrade infrastructure and facilities, and make Gallup a more livable community for everyone.

Now, it is the city staff’s job to implement the policy priorities set out by the city council, Ustick told the *Sun.* She said the city staff will develop action plans for each goal the city council wants to achieve, and they will also come up with a timeframe for each project and assign someone to be in charge.

Councilors spoke with the *Sun* right after the meeting, and then other city officials chimed in with additional details.

PUBLIC SAFETY BUILDING

Councilwoman Fran Palochak, Dist. 4, has been around Gallup long enough to know that the current police department building off Boardman Avenue needs an overhaul.

“They’ve been in that old building since I was a kid, and I’m old,” Palochak said.

Gallup Police Chief Franklin Boyd said the building has been on the department’s strategic plan list for two years and it has received support from the city council, the mayor, the state legislature, and the governor.

Yogash Kumar, Dist. 3, is pleased “everyone’s chipping in” to get funding for the police building remodel.

The current facility was constructed in the 1950s and has had “limited renovations,” Boyd said. But he said the water and HVAC systems have reached the end of their service life. He also pointed out that the foundation is settling noticeably in some areas of the building.

City Planner C.B. Strain told the *Sun* the new public safety building has a price tag of $16.5 million, with only $11.5 million currently allocated. The project cannot start, until another $5 million is obtained. But he says the project, is “shovel ready,” with a fully completed design plan.

STREETS, CURBS, GUTTERS, SIDEWALKS

Another “top” priority that Kumar cited as important to him was the Streets, Curbs, Gutter and Sidewalks program.

“I don’t want to live in a city that’s falling apart,” Kumar said. “There needs to be some process in place that constantly rejuvenates different neighborhoods.”

Curb and gutter improvements are needed to “promote a sense of community” and to attract tourism, Palochak added.

“We do a whole street of new curb, new gutter, and then we will resurface the whole street,” Palochak said. “We’ve been able to do a couple of streets a year in each (council) district. We each get to have two streets done every year.”

Palochak said streets that have been identified as needing the most work are being prioritized for repairs.

Councilwoman Linda Garcia, Dist. 1, also listed improving the streets as one of her top priorities. Her district covers the north side of Gallup, which is a lower-income district. She said she wants to make sure everyone in Gallup has an equal quality of life and she sees improving infrastructure as a way to do that.

Councilman Michael Schaaf, Dist. 2, wants to see other infrastructure such as water lines, the sewage system, and the electric lines worked on as well. He said that it would all come down to what the city can afford, but ultimately those systems need to be replaced.

Strain said all city infrastructure is important, making mention of how city streets are in disrepair, and curbs, gutters, and sidewalks are in “bad shape.”

“It’s a constant program to try to update our infrastructure, year-by-year,” he said.

Interim Public Works Director Robert Hamblen said streets and sidewalks in bad shape are a “hazard” to the community.

The beautification project is currently in Phase 1. Ustick said the city has finished working on the gas, water, sewer, and fiber optics for the alley between First and Second Streets. They are currently in the process of running underground power lines, which is something Ustick expects will be completed in the next month or so.

After that the city will be able to go out for bid for the final part of Phase 1, which will include getting the alleys paved, getting underground trash containers installed, beautifying the alleys, and finally, putting a drain down the middle of it.

Ustick is excited to get this first phase of the project done. “I think it will really help people understand what the plan is for the rest of the alleys,” she said.

The city plans to present the next step of the project to the city council for approval sometime this summer.

WATER LINES

Palochak is concerned about numerous water line breaks the city has experienced over the last few months.

“I want us to become proactive as opposed to reactive because I’ve been on council for six years and we’ve been in reactive mode for those whole six years,” she said. “I would like us to move toward identifying the weaker pipes. I hate to see our employees knee-deep in water trying to fix those.”

Dennis Romero, executive director of utilities, water and sanitation for Gallup, said two of the top priority water line projects are the replacement of cast iron lines dating back to the 1920s, as well as the replacement of lines around Maloney and Second Street.

On top of those projects, there’s also concern about well maintenance. Not only that, the city might have to drill a few more of them, as the federal government is delaying the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Project by several years.

“With respect to strategic planning, we take the Council’s priorities and direction and develop a five-year infrastructure and capital improvement plan schedule and proposed budget, which is designed to address their concerns and move projects forward,” Romero wrote in an email. “The priorities can change as issues arise.”

The Infrastructure Capital Improvement Plan budget is considered and approved by council yearly, but the city plans a minimum of five years out.

THE JOURNEY TO BROADBAND

Some people continue to work from home as the pandemic continues, and that can be a problem if they don’t have good internet access there. Assistant City Manager Jon DeYoung said Gallup is going to do something about that by getting broadband into the city.

But first DeYoung said, the city will put together a business plan. He said they will have to make sure they follow all of the state’s rules while they move through the process and take direction from the city council.

Once they put the plan together, it will be up to the council to decide whether they want to move forward with broadband.

EXPANDING CITY CEMETERIES

As people across the country die from COVID-19, more cities are looking to expand their cemeteries, Gallup included.

The City of Gallup currently maintains two of the city's cemeteries, Hillcrest Cemetery and Gallup City Cemetery.

"In order for the cemetery to fill up, people have to pass on, so I'm hoping I'm wrong, but my guesstimation is that [the cemetery] is going to be at capacity in the next four to five years," Gallup's Parks Director Vincent Alonzo said.

He is hoping the city council will approve the Gallup City Cemetery's expansion. Alonzo said he hasn't reached out to any property owners about buying land yet, because he's waiting for the city budget to be approved.

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