

City manager looms in Libby's future says study commission

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No changes are needed — for now.

That's the initial finding of the City of Libby Government Study Commission, which gave its tentative report to the public and the city council on Monday evening.

Commission members Earl Lovick, Lee Chandler and Dan Larson were elected to the study board in the 1994 general election and were charged with reviewing the city government's operations and to make suggested changes if they were warranted.

The city went through the same kind of review five years ago, and voters then elected to move to a charter form of government to separate the governing and administrative duties in the city structure.

This review commission, however, isn't recommending changes but is putting out a warning that some changes will be needed as the city grows.

That change would likely come by way

of a city manager, said Lovick, the chairman of the review commission.

The three commission members visited with city managers in Kalispell and Columbia Falls. There, they found most people are pleased with having a professional manage the day-to-day operations of entities such as water and sewer plants, street maintenance and grant writing.

But not all is good in these setups, Lovick said.

"I think this form of government is working well, but the city manager isn't universally loved, which is no surprise," he said.

The reason for the love-hate relationship comes in the cost of hiring a city manager, who is usually highly educated and comes with a high price tag.

Yet that doesn't mean those cities aren't getting their money's worth, Lovick said. Having someone responsible for city works is likely in Libby's future, he said.

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"We figured some day down the road, Libby might benefit from having a city manager, but not now," he said.

City voters 10 years ago first voted down a charter form of government because tagged along with it was the approval of a city manager. When that vote failed, the study commission asked voters to approve just the charter five years later, and they did.

Since then the city has had a city supervisor capable of doing the job of a city manager. Bill Kemp, who retired last year, had the background to manage water and sewer facilities, road maintenance as well as handle personnel and budgeting issues for the city.

"Quite frankly I felt we had the best of both worlds when we had Bill in place," Brown said. "He was a good manager and he could write our grants, drive a snow plow if it was needed and administer the city's programs. I'm not sure you'd get a manager out on street patrol."

Brown and the rest of the city council concurred with Lovick's conclusions.

Alderman Joe Johnston said the background of a city manager can help the council guide the city through a growth transition.

"As a community grows, it warrants some expertise in that field,"

he said.

As the city looks to revamping its water and sewer plants as well as possible annexation of homes on the edges of the city limits, the tasks of overseeing those changes will be difficult as the administration system is set up now, Chandler said.

"At some point in time, it's hard to find some person to handle a project three times the size of what we do have," Chandler said. "It becomes very taxing on the employees of our current structure. Our goal is to make everyone aware that departmentalization will happen down the road."

The study commission will make its final report to the public during a meeting at 7 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 12, at the city council chambers.