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Budget, economic development, labor negotiations top city's calendar

NEEDLES — The new year looks to be a busy one for the city of Needles with promises of projects completed and continuing to build on momentum.

Rick Daniels, city manager, said he has his eyes on three things for this year. The first important item is the mid-year budget and any revisions needed. Then they'll have to have a new budget completed by the end of June. He said the budget is the most important thing the city does. It ties in with everything else the city hopes to accomplish, he continued.

Second, Daniels said he's eyeing economic development. The early part of the year will mean finishing establishing a strategy and then embarking on those efforts to retain, expand and attract new business, he added. The Needles Economic Development Corporation will be a part of that, he said. The nonprofit organization will play a critical role in reviewing the draft strategy and giving feedback, he continued.

Another side to that is using the NEDC to help bring in other groups like the chamber of commerce and the downtown business alliance, he said. It's important for all these groups to work together for the good of the whole community, he added.

Labor negotiations are being opened again, he said. At this point, nothing is known other than the public employees' labor union wants to talk, he added.

Terry Campbell, vice-mayor, said it's not certain, but it's likely the labor union wants to discuss the furloughs and healthcare benefits given all the changes with the Affordable Healthcare Act. Campbell has his eyes on similar goals for the city in 2014. He said it's the city's responsibility to stay in control of the budget and to have a cash reserve so the city can address needs, such as utility repairs and expenses. A cash reserve also helps with doing maintenance such as road repairs, he continued.

Economic development is high on Campbell's list also. He said the belief is there is a lot of potential in Route 66. Needles is the first city in California on the historic roadway.

The other major potential draw is the river, Campbell said. He feels that projects like the Needles Lagoon and Bureau Bay will help bring in more people to be on the river and spend time and money in Needles.

The Bureau Bay and Needles Lagoon projects are long-term and won't be completed soon, but the results will be what makes it worth it, he said.

Campbell said once Bureau Bay is cleaned up, it will help make Jack Smith Park that much more attractive. He's also hoping to see a resort type of business be brought in because he feels there are plenty of riverfront areas that provide for that type of business.

There also needs to be growth for homes, he said. Needles is in a position that it needs to cater to retirees. The city has ways to attract that group of people, he added.

Linda Kidd, councilwoman, also spoke of economic development. Economic development should get a jump start with the completion of the El Garces intermodal transportation facility, she said.

Once that major project is complete, it will mean the city can market it to businesses to fill in the space, she said. It will also be available to use for events and will house Amtrak and be available to other transportation groups, she added.

The El Garces project being completed is a big deal because it will show the city is working to get things done, she said. It will help get more people on board and join the momentum that's increasing for economic development, she added.

Both she and Campbell mentioned getting the Needles Highway project completed. They commented that it's a project that will help with economic development but also in the end will save money by not having to perform major repairs such as had to be done during the flooding back at the end of August.

Kidd said she hopes to see more collaborative work between the city, the hospital, the school district and Palo Verde Community College Needles Center. That has already started, but more of that will be necessary, she said.

The budget and economic development, ways to increase revenue, were the focus for Daniels, Campbell and Kidd. All three appeared optimistic about 2014 for the city.