

Over the Back Fence
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Sneaking under the smokescreen
By Alva Wood

Freddie Fallis stopped by administrator Henry Hill's office the other day.

"Boss?" he asks tentatively. "Got a minute?"

"No," says Henry, "but since you're already here, go ahead."

"I need more money for Parks and Recreation," says Freddie.

"Council has already set the budgets for the year," says Henry.

"I know," says Freddie. "But every time you run short, like for re-building Main Street, you take it out of Parks and Rec."

"So?" says Henry.

"Well, Council instructed me to spend more money on Parks. The playing field needs mowing. The toilets need cleaning. I'm supposed to remove all the trees that have been infested by the mountain pine beetle. And I'm told to remove all illegal docks and fire pits from the lake frontage."

"So?" says Henry again.

"I gotta have some equipment," Freddie pleads. "Like a chainsaw or two. And a ride-on mower. And a bulldozer, or at least a Bobcat."

"How much is all that going to cost?" asks Henry.

Freddie pulls a crumpled sheet of paper out of the back pocket of his jeans. "I got three estimates from the suppliers in River City," he says, "and I added 50% for overhead, like you taught me."

Henry examines the total. "It's big enough to get the councillors' attention," he says, sucking his pencil. "But it hasn't a snowball's chance in hell of passing."

Freddie looks crestfallen.

"Freddie, Freddie," sighs Henry. "All these years of working with me and you haven't learned a thing about human psychology, have you?"

Henry adds some more figures and hands the paper back to Freddie.

Freddie stares at it. "But we don't need another printer," he protests. "And what's this item for toilet paper?"

"Nothing pisses people off like using a biffy and finding there's no toilet paper," explains Henry. "You'll see why. Go do it. Your minute's up."

Freddie presents his proposals at the next Council meeting. As he expects, his figures get torn apart.

Deirdre Pollacks wants to know what kind of printer Freddie's planning on buying. "Inkjet printers are cheaper to purchase," Hector says. "But they nail you on the cartridges. You should consider a laser printer. They only cost a few dollars more initially, but they cost much less to operate."

"You don't have to buy new inkjet cartridges," Mayor Jake Bowers points out. "You can get them refilled for about a quarter of the price."

"Have you checked Costco?" Rosie Green wants to know. "They're much cheaper than Staples."

"You can get a discount at Canadian Tire, if you ask for one," says Dunc McMahon.

"I think we need a proper price comparison," says Deirdre. "What's the cost per sheet of the various printers you're considering?"

"Actually," says Rosie, "I have an old printer at home I'm not using. I'd be happy to donate it, instead of you having to buy one."

"How many pages per minute will it print?" Deirdre persists. "It might be cheaper, but it could become a bottleneck that affects our operating efficiency."

"Could we consider at this item for toilet paper?" interrupts Hector. "I'd like to be sure that you're using recycled paper, to protect the environment."

"Screw the environment," Dunc objects. "That recycled stuff is like wiping your ass with sandpaper. How soft is this stuff you're ordering?"

"Recycled paper tends to come at a premium price," mayor Jake Bowers contributes.

“Have you checked Costco?” asks Rosie.

The discussion went on past midnight. The councillors debated every possible way of saving pennies on printers, paper, ink, toner, and electricity. They even took a break to personally test several brands of toilet paper. But they passed all the big items without raising a single question.

“See?” says Henry, and he and Freddie lock up the offices. “That’s how you do it.”