

To the residents of the City of Cedar Springs,

Since late December 2011, I have asked that the City Council and City Staff remain out of the media as much as possible with regard to the ongoing negotiations with the Red Flannel Festival. At the time I was trying to protect the integrity of those negotiations. I now believe it is time for that silence to be lifted and for the City to defend itself against false accusations and untruths.

I would like to start off by saying that I would like nothing more than to be able to work out our differences with the Red Flannel Festival. Unfortunately it seems that after many meetings with their ad-hoc committee and ours, the last being with both parties' attorneys present, we are still far from a resolution.

It was a difficult decision, and not one that was taken lightly, when in 2011 the City Council cut the in-kind services that we've been providing to the Red Flannel Festival (a 503C nonprofit organization) for the previous 72 years. The City has, in previous years budgets, had to cut services, positions, etc. Many of those cuts took place prior to the in-kind services to the Red Flannel Festival being eliminated. A list of the cuts the City has made since 2008 is available tonight for your review. As I am sure you are aware, State Revenue sharing has been severely reduced which has made a significant impact to the City budget and we know the Personal Property Tax is being eliminated and the proposed replacement of that being no more than 81% replacement at best. This too, when implemented, will have a significant impact to the City's budget.

The difficult financial decisions that the City Council has had to make is purely about being fiscally responsible and being able to continue substantiality to provide necessary services now and in the future years to the tax paying citizens of Cedar Springs.

Over approximately the last 15 months, we as a City have been accused of trying to make life harder for the Red Flannel Festival. This simply is NOT true. We have done everything within our power to work with them concerning the Festival. It is very frustrating that the positive things the City has done to assist the Red Flannel Festival go unnoticed or are taken as a negative.

I have been told that it is our City Manager (the outsider) that doesn't understand the importance of the Red Flannel Festival. Again, this simply is not true. While she understands the importance of the Red Flannel Festival, she also understands her responsibility to the City as the City Manager is being in charge of the day-to-day operations of the City and the substantiality of those operations.

During the first meeting we had with Red Flannel Festival representatives, one of the first things I was told was "she's got to go!" referring to the City Manager, Christine Burns, who by the way, was asked to remove herself as much as possible from the Red Flannel Festival situation, prior to our meeting because it was obvious that there was a problem between the City Manager and members of the Festival Board. It was also stated by a

member of their board the “the Festival is the only thing going in Cedar Springs and that we need the festival.”

Since that meeting, I have heard complaints from the festival over everything from a business owner being harassed, to the City Manager making changes to ordinances to derail the festival. Let me make it clear now.....the City Manager does not make changes to the ordinances, the city council makes ordinances changes through a majority vote. The City Manager works for us, the City Council and she answers to us, the City Council. The standard answer that I have given to our City Manager is “you treat them like you would treat anyone else in the city.” It is my belief that ordinances are to be enforced or they should not be on the books.

Which brings me to my next point; the festival has chosen to move their Grand Lodge. We did not ask for, encourage, discourage or comment on the proposed move, the decision was purely their own. However, because they decided to make this change, the staff here at city hall, as they should do with any new event, looked into the ordinances to make sure the temporary tent, and music event were allowable use of the location, or if they would need a variance. After the city manager consulted with the city planner and city attorney, it was determined that the Festival would need to obtain a variance to have an event at that location, however if the event was purely a musical event, and was deemed to be a community event, we as a council have the right to waive the requirements of a variance. All that is required is for the festival to give us written notification declaring themselves as a community event, and make the request for the Council to waive the requirements. The festival was made aware of these requirements at the meeting both parties, including attorneys, participated in on June 7. They were also made aware that I personally would be willing to lend support for these requirements to be waived.

Also explained by the city attorney, Jeff Sluggett, at this same meeting, was the fact that the temporary use ordinance did not speak to temporary tents. Because it is not specifically spoken to, it is not considered a permitted use, and therefore would need to be addressed by the city. So an ordinance was being presented to the planning commission, not to prohibit tents, but to make them an allowable use. It was also explained to the Red Flannel Festival representatives that this issue was brought to the attention of myself and Christine Fahl on Thursday, May 24. We asked that notification of this issue not be sent in the mail but that Christine would contact the Red Flannel Ad-hoc committee personally to explain the situation. We felt at the time it would be the better way to approach the issue due to the ongoing negotiations with the festival. Due to the upcoming Memorial Day weekend it was decided that on Tuesday, May 29 Christine would contact the Red Flannel Ad-hoc committee to set up a date and time to meet. The morning of May 29 the City received the cease and desist order from the festival, it was decided at that time that everything be put on hold until legal counsel could be contacted and we could be given some direction as to how to proceed. This time line and the intentions of the city were clearly explained but still on June 8 (the day after this meeting) the festival posted a headline on the festival facebook page stating, “city manger retaliates by amending ordinance to include tents”.

Fact #1: clearly the festivals accusations of retaliation are unfounded due to the fact that the city was already in the process of addressing the matter and was planning on contacting the Red Flannel Ah-hoc committee on the precise date that the City received the cease and desist order

Fact #2: we informed the festival of the time line and intentions on June 7 and they still chose to make a public statement on their facebook page of retaliation on June 8

Fact #3: the city was amending the ordinance to make temporary tents an allowable use, therefore making it easier for the festival to have the Grand Lodge.

Again I go back to the statement I said earlier...It is very frustrating that the positive things that the City has done to assist the Red Flannel Festival go unnoticed or are taken as a negative.

Lastly, at the June 7 meeting we were told by the festival that it needs to go back to the way it was. When asked what that meant, we were told we needed to provide the services for the festival at no charge, and then we could go back to using the logos. Or we could pay the festival for the use of the logos. We were told that maybe they would just leave Cedar Springs altogether and move the festival to Casanova. At a previous meeting, Sand Lake was threatened. We were also told that the City without the Red Flannel Festival has nothing to offer. I strongly disagree!

Some of you may or may not be aware of the fact that my family has or have had a close relationship with the Red Flannel Festival over the years. It started with my sister circulating a petition in the seventies I believe, to have red flannels instead of teardrops painted on our water tower. Sometime later my father for approximately 3 years set up the parade, and was a keystone cop, he also had the pleasure of doing the bicentennial parade. Both of my older sisters participated in the Queens pageant and all of my siblings and I all marched in the parade as a member of the Red Hawk marching band. My brother over the past couple of years has provided the fireworks shows, and last but certainly not least, my father was named as this years Grand Marshall. So please know that no one loves the Red Flannel Festival any more than I do. But that is not what this is all about.

This is about fiscal responsibility to the tax paying citizens of Cedar Springs. For the last five years the City has made cut after cut to it's budget.

So here we are, no closer to a resolution. Do we "go back to the way it was", as suggested by the festival. Which leaves us finding something else, some other service we provide to the tax paying citizens, to cut in our ever-dwindling budget? Do we make **more** cuts to the DPW Department or front office staff? To the police department or perhaps the fire department?

Well, I see this problem as having three possible solutions and they are as follows:

1. The City and the Festival Board agree to the last proposal sent by the City to the Festival.
2. We do as ordered by the festival and stop using the logos altogether. Then we create a new logo for Cedar Springs.
3. Or do what I suggested to the festival last year (that they were opposed to at the time). Put it on the ballot and let the voters (who have to pick up the bill) decide.

Respectfully,

Charles P. Watson, Mayor
City of Cedar Springs