

Orange DPW head worries about salt, tires and funding

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer, Orange Transcript

A City Council meeting early in the summer might seem like an unlikely time to discuss the need for salt to help clear Orange's streets during snowstorms. But that's what Arlene Kemp, the city's acting public works director, had to do during a recent session.

During the June 16 meeting, Kemp had to justify her requests for funding increases for salt and tire repairs in the city's 2010 fiscal year budget and explain to the council how her vision for the department and its services is dramatically different from her predecessors.

She told council members that despite the recession, there are certain basic things she needs to run her department.

Kemp's message was reminiscent of remarks she made to the council in 2008 after she was appointed to serve as acting public works director by Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. when former Director Robert Corrado retired.

Then, Kemp told the council that due to the lack of a capital budget, the city might not be able to have salt when it snows. She also warned that a truck purchased in 1980 and a loader from 1995 had to be replaced.

Since then, Kemp said she worked to rectify the problems in her department, but it has not been easy. On June 16, she told the council she is trying to address the difficulties she inherited, such as the lack of an adequate storage facility for salt supplies, while also taking an active approach to serving the city through negotiations with other municipalities and city departments.

"I want to reiterate that as we go through the budget process, you're going to see recurring instances of this because the Public Works Department was underfunded," said Kemp. "In Public Works, there is not a lot of gray area. There are other departments where you can make judgments about what to spend money on or not, but if a cop car is down, then we have to fix that flat tire because we don't have the luxury of having the amount of resources where we could choose not to fix one because others could fill in for it."

Apparently, Kemp said, tires have also been a longstanding problem in her department. She said the same goes for a tree truck that was not working properly. Kemp said it led to problems trimming trees around Orange and resulted in a city man being struck and killed by a falling branch during a windstorm last year.

"The standard procedure was to take tires and wheels off vehicles that weren't being used on a given day and put them on the vehicles that were being used. To me, that was wasteful," said Kemp. "To me, police cars should be on the road serving the community. For instance, we're out of asphalt and we're going into July, which is the time where potholes should be filled and streets paved instead of waiting until the winter, but we don't have any asphalt."

Her talk of asphalt and paving streets during the summer led Kemp back to the need for salt and a place to store it for winter. Once again, Kemp said the biggest obstacle to her department was the lack of money.