

Sensmeier: Stop throwing away good money on bad pipes

“Building an airplane while flying it” is a quip that many of us have heard used to describe processes or projects that move forward before much thought is put into how that it will actually function in the real world.

Of course, in building and designing airplanes we spend years understanding however the smallest changes or trade-offs in design or materials will impact how the craft will actually fly. To avoid disaster, we put the time in to ensure we answer the inevitable questions of “what if” in terms of our designs.

As city leaders look at the list of infrastructure projects that need to be done over the next few years, it is similarly expected that they will be forced to ensure that experts plan and design projects that will last and stand up to challenges that may come decades from now. In doing so, local professionals should ensure that they do not sacrifice quality for dollars and cents in their designs to avoid decisions being made today that could really come back to haunt us in the long-term.

Prescott’s list of infrastructure projects includes street reconstructions, drainage projects, buildings and other facilities as well as a number of water projects to replace pipes. These things get expensive, and we would all be rightfully angry if our elected leaders didn’t make budget-friendly decisions.

But let’s take a moment to think about what budget-friendly means. It does not mean doing things on the cheap. It means making decisions based on the expert judgment of professionals who know what they’re talking about. That means listening to Prescott Public Works Director Craig Dotseth and his staff who work with contractors to design and carry out the projects.

The Prescott City Council approved an initiative to ban the city from using plastic PVC pipe in water infrastructure projects. Part of their decision may have been based on a presentation from Dotseth showing that it has already cost the city \$1.4 million for repairs from PVC pipe failures from 1985 to 2013, including incidents in which city employees were injured and a private vehicle fell into a sinkhole. The city had to pay for that vehicle, which means that we as business owners and taxpayers had to pay for it. To continue using pipes that have already cost us more than \$1 million would be the height of folly.

But here’s the thing: at times, plastic pipes can cost less to purchase than others made of more resilient materials. So, a lot of elected officials who would rather not explain higher project costs to citizens choose the cheaper path versus looking at the long-term investment. Prescott is fortunate to be served by men and women who lead with integrity; not everywhere is so fortunate, which is why efforts to actually mandate or require the use of plastic pipes in water infrastructure projects have been mounted in other states.

The reason none of those initiatives have worked is because plastic pipes cost more over time as they break more frequently, leading not just to repairs but factoring in secondary costs to water line breaks and costs businesses have to absorb when left without water. We have seen this first-hand in Prescott.

Small businesses have already suffered enough from the pandemic. The average loss for a U.S. business is \$230 in sales per employee for each day without water. These are troubling numbers, and certainly not anything we can afford, especially now as we're on the brink of starting a recovery from the pandemic.

Business owners must plan for so many things — being short-staffed because an employee is out sick; finding the right balance of products on-hand and managing backorders; managing health protocols, and so many other items. We can't always plan for disasters, though, and having to close up because a pipe breaks and the business cannot safely operate without running water is bad for business. And it is bad for the health of our community.

I commend Prescott's city leaders for their decision and for listening to Dotseth's reasoning to stop using plastic PVC pipes. Being fiscally responsible means looking at the cost of the entire project, which includes looking at the projected durability and length of service we can expect from pipes and other materials. And the cost to the community.

Pipes made from plastic PVC are clearly not up to the job over the long-term, particularly not in Prescott's rocky soil, so let's not waste anymore of our resources on them.

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<https://www.dcourier.com/news/2021/mar/04/sensmeier-stop-throwing-away-good-money-bad-pipes/>