By Cynthia D. Jardon

I spent more than 20 years as a journalist making sure every word I wrote was fact. So it was a concern to see a letter to the editor titled "City spends too much," published in The Town Talk on Sunday, Feb. 23, full of misinformation. On behalf of the mayor and the City Council, I'd like to present the facts.

It is expected some citizens are not for any tax, some are for it based on community returns on that investment, and some do not care. But the letter writer's claim for being against a tax —that the city spends too much — is just plain wrong.

Alexandria has one of the lowest current millage rates in the state on a comparative basis at 18, and is considered a state fiscal leader.

In 2006-07, this Administration began slashing take home vehicles. It was the largest change in "take home" vehicle policy in the city's history and was reported extensively by The Town Talk.

The policy does recognized, however, that some cars should be taken home to advance an important citizen savings: emergency responders and fuel consumption. When employees are on city duty, fuel is paid by the city. For emergency responders and first call employees, when a call comes in, it makes little sense to drive a personal vehicle back to work to get a vehicle to then respond to an event. Precious time is lost. For those not on call, when their vehicle is one with special tools or equipment, again, from a cost-benefit standpoint, the best bang is to furnish the vehicle (with its equipment) and allow it to be taken home.

Second, together the trolley buses cost a nominal exchange fee of $29,000 as they were part of a donation by a sister city. The trolleys, which would cost upwards of $300,000 new, now are leased to citizens for special occasions, such as weddings, Mardi Gras parties, reunions, and such, making them a revenue generator, not an expense. They are also loved by many citizens, are an attractive feature from a tourism perspective, and add to our quality of life. We get many accolades for these buses.

Thirdly, the city purchases no luxury vehicles. Additionally, some trucks are fabricated by our fabrication/paint shop, and city vehicles are maintained by the motor pool shop. All vehicles are purchased on state contract, saving taxpayers thousands of dollars annually.

We also have a vehicle purchasing policy because it is actually more expensive on you, the taxpayer, to let vehicles depreciate to nothing and try to purchase them all at once with all other rolling stock needs. This makes little economic sense. All vehicles are purchased on state contract, saving you thousands of dollars annually. Check out the policy online. It is a model of efficiency, not a waste of your tax dollars. Luxury vehicles seen in parades are actually private vehicles with City emblems attached by magnet or other fabrication. You can view the entire city fleet online, and also in this administration we introduced pooled vehicles to save money. No overbuying here.

Fourthly, under this administration, the city carried the lowest employee complement in decades, operating in its leanest fashion through a recession and carrying high approval marks from the public for services. During this same period, we created the best fiscal policy and findings in the City's history, measured by multiple factors. Indeed, the City is enjoying its best fiscal state, while moving the most capital dollars in projects all across the City in its history, setting two record years in a row — hardly an example of over hiring or over spending given the employee complement and work ethic to produce record accomplishments.

Fifthly, the roundabout proposed at Jackson Street is a state project (not city). The city, however, properly challenged each decision along the way. The roundabout was the traffic control method providing the best traffic alternative, the state concluded. While a roundabout costs more in capital dollars, the savings in travel time, less serious accidents, and other benefits outweighs a signal, according to the state.

The sixth point is most curious. As cities grow, fire coverages change, requiring station repositioning. Without new fire stations, we would lose our excellent fire rating and what are currently some of the lowest fire insurance premiums in Louisiana. That means homeowner premiums would increase — significantly. We believe that would, indeed, be bad decision-making. The new Jones Street station represents a savings to citizens, not a cost.

As a City grows, the radii governing fire coverage, of course, changes. Fire stations once having an acceptable coverage radius find themselves no longer meeting those strict requirements. If you are out of coverage, then you are out: whether by one block or two. The Broadway station and all others were studied by some remarkable engineering work to reestablish the coverage radii since moving one station affects all others. The Broadway station simply will not work, and the neighborhood participated in the new choice for a beautiful, functional and long lasting piece of public infrastructure on Jones Street. This represents a savings to citizens, not a cost. The city is quite proud of the SPARC initiative for its Fire Station Relocation plan—a best practice by any measure.

Lastly, the Fulton hotel — The repairs made by the city initially, when the city had to rescue the Fulton from a private sector bankruptcy, were made by federal Urban Development Action Grant funds generated by the hotel's activities while under private ownership and management and restricted for the hotel. The city used these funds for capital improvements in the beginning months from funds paid as rent to the city since the 1980s when the decision to build the hotel was made. Those funds were restricted to that use anyway, so it can hardly be said the city wasted taxpayer funds.

Upon the sale of the Fulton, a requirement is the replenishment of this fund, which will again be locked into use for hotel-convention related activity, anyway. At that point any remaining outlay will be recuperated. This was a best practice in tough circumstances not in any way created by the city but by abysmal private sector management prior to the city's involvement. Remember, the city already owned the land and leased it to the hotel owner.

It is estimated by experts (local hoteliers and real estate professionals) that tens of millions of dollars are lost in community revenues because of the need to have a first-class hotel attached to the Riverfront Center. The city will therefore remain engaged to aid in this solution to protect a decision—right or wrong—made decades ago. Because of this Administration's choice to make the private sector managers carry all risk, we have avoided burdening the taxpayer. Stay tuned for announcements here very soon!

One thing we agree on: the City indeed does "not have a money problem" — it is in the best financial shape of its history. Neither, however, does it have a spending problem, since our excellent financial state was established by austerity and careful spending. For example, the current administration has saved millions of dollars in in-house planning and grants through SPARC historically contracted out through consultants.

A millage allows the public to vote; it does not involve the city forcing the issue. A vote is the ultimate exercise of public choice, and this particular one flows from public input of the highest order.

Since "bad facts" make for bad decisions, this office on behalf of the council and mayor responds to information that may unintentionally mislead citizens. All policy making on this issue has occurred in the open, with painstaking detail, and can be viewed online.

The cty neither endorses nor requests passage but points out that if this level of activity in recreation is desired—and by community input it is—then dedicated revenue is required—and these amounts follow what the public said they had the appetite to spend in this regard.

The millage proposed was not proposed by the mayor or council but by citizens who participated in a statistically validated survey of 2,500 Alexandrians who said what they would be willing to do in order to have top notch recreation. By the way, top notch recreation can cut down on societal costs by easing juvenile crime costs and increasing health outcomes.

Whether you vote for the proposed recreation millage or not, it is important that citizens make this decision based on facts — not bad information.

Cynthia Jardon is the public information officer for the City of Alexandria and a former editor/reporter for The Town Talk.

Submitted by:
Cynthia Jardon
Public Information Officer
318-449-5038
318-290-1497

Cynthia.jardon@cityofalex.com
Follow us on Facebook and Twitter at
www.facebook.com/cityofalexandria – Alexandria, Louisiana – Mayor's Office
www.twitter.com – Cynthia Jardon@Alexlaconnects
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