

Letter To The Editor: Councilman Pledges To Continue His Work On Aligning Finances With Fixing Flooding, Streets and Enhancing Public Safety

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Almost two years ago, Wood River residents learned of our city’s intent to build a new 34,000 square foot recreation center where the current historic Round House stands. A discussion ensued among many of us about the positive impact the Round House had on their families. An informal group quickly formed to “Save the Roundhouse” and we gathered nearly 900 petition signatures to place the issue on the November 2020 ballot.

When 72% of voters voiced their opposition to building a new rec center, I thought the issue was settled.

Instead, the Wood River City Council continued down the path of prioritizing discretionary capital spending over urgent infrastructure needs. They also repeatedly rejected seeking a feasibility study which would have gauged a new rec center's annual income versus cost. As a CPA, I wasn't content to go without that important information, so I researched on my own the results found in other communities. The results will alarm you.

Neither the East Alton nor the Roxana recreation centers generate enough income to cover their operating costs, requiring taxpayer bailouts in the form of property taxes. Some city officials compare Wood River's possible rec center to Fairview Heights. I reviewed their income statement and was surprised to see that despite operating income of over \$1.1 million, it still posted a net operating loss of over \$380k in its inaugural year, when one would anticipate the largest membership surge.

Other towns with new rec centers suffered a similar fate. Arnold, Missouri posts net losses year after year, with \$896k in 2020, and total operating losses over five years of \$3.125 million. Cities from Highland to Marion, Illinois carry the burden of annual losses with few choices until the debt to build those rec centers is paid off.

Our community is strong because residents step up, help each other, and understand how to prioritize scarce resources. As a candidate for city council, I promised to represent your views on this and other important topics. I will continue to focus on aligning Wood River's finances with residents' priorities of fixing flooding, repairing sidewalks, improving our streets, and enhancing public safety.

I hope you continue to hold me and the rest of the city council accountable, and I hope to see you at a city council or town hall meeting in the very near future.

Jeremy Plank

Wood River City Councilman

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