



“A Perfect Storm on the Horizon”

**By Upton Mayor
Nick Trandahl**

With legislation taking a cleaver to property tax advancing through the Wyoming Legislature this session, I anticipate some struggle in the days ahead for rural Wyoming towns, counties, and districts. For Weston County, its municipalities, and school districts there's going to be some blows forthcoming, especially combined with the Freedom Caucus' ongoing assault on county and municipal government, local decision-making, and on Wyoming public education, including the villainization of our educators and librarians, local people who have served Weston County students lovingly and diligently, for generations in some instances.

But let's talk property tax ... again. At the risk of beating a dead horse, there still seems to be such wild misinformation and assumptions out there about property tax. If you hear something nefarious about property tax, it would be worth your while here in Weston County to touch base with Weston County Assessor Kara Lenardson, so she can set you straight.

Something I'm hearing a lot from folks celebrating the potential property tax cuts, including the 50% cut for homeowners which successfully made its way through the Senate, is that towns have been receiving a glut of property tax funding the last few years, living beyond their means, and now will just have to return to the world and

budgets they had prior to the growth of property tax rates in Wyoming. So, let's clear a couple things up.

The misconception that small Wyoming towns like Upton are sitting on any sort of fat whatsoever in our budgets is mind-blowing to me and, frankly, it's uninformed. Our budgets are already trimmed to the bone, even with a skeleton crew of city staff. A decade ago, the Town of Upton paid substantially less for every single project, improvement, and service. As a small town with a single grocery store, which doesn't contribute sales tax revenue because groceries aren't taxable, and with the Legislature continually threatening to cut the direct distribution funds which were created as a backfill for the abolishment of our sales tax revenue, any tax revenue is a godsend to continue providing increasingly improvements and public services to our constituents. According to my bank account, every single thing has gotten vastly more expensive in the last four years. Those increased costs aren't just for individuals. They're also for municipalities. Our expensive projects (oftentimes mandated by the state) are now outlandishly expensive.

Also, the notion that small Wyoming towns like Upton or the Upton Town Council are somehow benefiting from tax revenue is misinformed and ignorant. Do you want to know who's benefitting? You are. As a resident of Upton, you should know that street improvements, infrastructure work, paying for law enforcement or reserve officers (yes, the Upton Police Department still has a budget and we're actively looking to hire officers, including with additional financial incentives), fire fighting equipment, a gorgeous city park, running water, etc. are for your benefit. They're services paid for through taxes. The lack of understanding of public services and local governmental funding of Wyoming small towns is jarring and more than a little disheartening. Part of being a community is everyone pitching in for mutual benefit and

development. That's why humans gathered together, for mutual benefit. That's the reason why things like taxes, fees, and utility rates were developed—so we can all continue to have a functioning society.

Our small communities, including Upton, are already on a shoestring budget. This move by the Legislature will be brutal for municipalities, districts, and counties, and the services provided by those entities will be devastated, even with the 75% backfill amendment for hardship counties like Weston County which was added to the proposed legislation and appears to be unconstitutional. Everything is on the chopping block when we talk about chopping property tax. For towns like Upton and counties like Weston County, the forthcoming hardship could be enormous. We will make it through, but this will not be comfortable for any of us making our home here.

I hope Governor Gordon's veto pen is full of ink, but he can't stop all the hurt being crammed through by the Legislature, the majority of whom appear to be out-of-step with the needs and issues being faced by actual rural Wyoming communities. I'd be on the lookout for a big fat state tax in the near future to correct the damage this will do to our communities.
