

City's 'alley-capping caper' a far cry from Chicago-style politics

As a recent transplant to Duluth, I must confess to harboring some homesickness for Chicago. That was until reading the Oct. 29 story, "Alley capping questioned," about repairs made by the city to the alley behind Mayor Don Ness' parents' house. I suddenly felt right at home.

Chicago runs almost entirely on clout-driven favors like the one suggested against Ness. In fact, alley-capping probably ranks only slightly behind knee-capping as a political tool of choice there. And that's hardly due to a shortage of pothole-riddled alleys.

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LOCAL VIEW

necessarily correspond with

pothole-riddled alleys.

Controversies generated by such favors follow a familiar script: A disgruntled resident cries foul. A hungry press corps goes on the hunt. A councilor vows an investigation. The honcho in question issues a categorical denial. The appropriate city official steps forward to reiterate the denial — thus confirming its duplicity or veracity, depending on how badly you need the same service on your own block.

The difference between Duluth and Chicago, at least in this case, was that I actually believed Barb Kolodge, the city's streets and park maintenance supervisor, who said the "fix" was not "in" here. To paraphrase City Councilor Jim Stauber, such brazen clout-wielding just isn't the Boy Wonder's (my moniker for Ness, not Stauber's) style.

Some readers may disagree, and I really wouldn't blame them. Missing from the city's denials, Stauber's testimonial and the local media's coverage was an explanation of exactly how the city *does* choose which streets and alleys to repair and how it prioritizes them.

Does the city carry out a comprehensive assessment of all its streets annually and prioritize repairs based on level of disrepair or on volume of traffic flow? Do the squeakiest wheels — the most disgruntled or frequent callers to the city's two hotlines — get the quickest grease? Or does the department load ping-pong balls scrawled with city street names into a churning lottery barrel and then schedule repairs in the order the balls dribble out?

To find out, I followed up with Kolodge. Turns out, she pulls a little from each of the first two approaches.

In the process of patching holes for hotline callers, Kolodge's crews create an inventory of Duluth's worst streets and alleys, which they share with her each year. She then visits each site personally and rates it from one to five with five being most urgent. This rating system essentially sets the priority order for the year; some deck-shuffling can occur, but only due to changing conditions on the ground (which do not

necessarily correspond with spikes in call volume). From there the city caps till it can cap no more.

Perhaps if the rest of us understood the process more clearly from the beginning and had some simple way of monitoring it — like the computer-tracking system on Kolodge's wish list — we'd be less apt to assume our tax dollars were being sucked into a venal vortex of incompetence and graft. Perhaps we'd even show less

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reluctance toward committing more tax dollars to infrastructure investments like roads and bridges. Even in these tough times.

Instead, we taxpayers were treated to the kind of Windy City-style he said-she said that only undermines public confidence in the city as a responsible steward of our tax dollars. It's a shame in this case because Kolodge's current crew has stretched shrinking dollars as well as any

department in the city.

They're the ones who finally implemented the capping strategy — discussed by her predecessors but never acted upon — that saves the city money over patching in the short term. According to Kolodge, they also saved the city 46 percent on outside contractor costs and used that money to patch every street in the city at least once this year.

"I couldn't be prouder of this crew," she told me.

Again, I believe her. And again, others may not. In fact, dissenters can probably point to a pothole right in front of their driveway in doing so. That's understandable, but this closer look into how Kolodge's department squeezes value out of a wilting budget and work force makes a strong case for more tax investment for streets and roads, not less.

It's funny how a little transparency and accountability can reveal a success story where scandal appeared to lurk. Given the recent short supply of both on Wall Street, Duluth city taxes may start looking like smart money after all.

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