

City council sets goals; outreach at top of list

By Sue Stafford
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When the Sisters City Council sat down last week for their annual 2015 goal-setting workshop, they had an agenda packed with the “business of City business” – budgets, current and potential projects, financial projections, a host of acronyms (TSP, EDCO, CCI, SDC, BPAP) – as well as a review of last year’s goals.

Four of the five councilors were in attendance, with president McKibben Womack the lone absence. Chris Frye, mayor, and councilors Wendy Holzman, David Asson, and Nancy Connolly spent four hours working through the agenda.

Also there representing the City staff were: Andrew Gorayeb, City manager; Paul Bertagna, Public Works director; Pauline Hardie, Community Development director; Lynne Fujita-Conrads, Finance director; and Kathy Nelson, City Recorder. Three citizens came to watch City government in action.

Councilors had been asked ahead of time to submit their own goals for the City for the coming year. There were no goals from Womack. New member Nancy Connolly began her comments by voicing her concern about the lack of communication between the City and the citizens of Sisters.

“The main goal for the council is to re-establish the trust of the citizens... We bypass the process of citizen input and then get whiplash from the citizens” when a decision is made or a project announced. She continued, “We need to improve our community outreach. This has to be addressed. We need to be a better partner, to unite the community. We are stronger with citizen input.”

To that end, Connolly recommended re-establishing the Committee for Citizen Involvement (CCI) as an advisory group for the council. There was a great deal of talk around the CCI, as it expanded into a discussion of how to recruit and retain citizen volunteers on the various City boards and committees.

Councilman Asson stated, “They need direction from the council, with guidelines for their job, and then let them work.”

Other goals proposed by Connolly had to do with affordable housing, for not only low- but also moderate-income families, so that employees of local businesses can afford to live in Sisters,

thereby encouraging new businesses to come to town.

She would like to see the “code issues” cleaned up so that they are interpreted the same way in all instances.

“The community doesn’t trust anyone at City Hall,” she cautioned.

Councilor Asson concurred with Connelly on the issue of an improved affordable housing policy, stressing the necessity of offering real cost savings and expedited processing to developers. He believes the City can’t do it all.

“It will take some outside money so we need to attract investors,” said Asson. “A 10- to 20-unit apartment/residence/condo development as a first-year experiment would be ideal.”

Several of Asson’s other goals included increased funding for the City’s economic development program (EDCO) and establishing a water and sewer rate schedule that assures rate-payer equity and builds cash reserves. Additionally, he has asked for a review of all current City-involved litigation and possible financial ramifications.

Councilor Holzman proposed keeping the same five goals from 2014, which would include her continuing work with the Community Assets Committee and Parks Advisory Board to identify, establish or improve new and existing assets. In the economic development arena, Holzman agreed with the others about the need for living-wage jobs, funding the EDCO position at full-time, and to continue to work closely with the Sisters Area Chamber of Commerce to increase tourism.

She reported that connectivity will be improved with the construction of a roundabout at Highway 20 and Barclay. All councilors concurred that publicity, education and outreach to the community by both the City and Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) are

crucial to the public understanding the history behind and the rationale for the roundabout.

Mayor Frye’s goals focused on investment in youth, livability of Sisters, economic development, housing, and the resolution of back-in parking. He believes that the enhancement of our parks would help portray Sisters as more family-focused with available facilities and activities.

Frye also stressed the importance of considering the opinions and concerns of “the people who live here and what they want,” regarding things like increased support for local nonprofits through community grants, tree-planting ratios, improving neighborhood sidewalks and making Creekside Campground a better neighbor.

The mayor said the goal regarding citizen involvement and community outreach is going to be thoroughly discussed in a separate council workshop.

“We are looking at workshopping what steps will be successful at gauging community sentiment,” he said. “It is a very important issue. We want to take a look at how we can best do it, very specifically. Nothing yet is 100 percent concrete. We want to boil down our ideas.”

Council agreed to retain the five overarching goals from 2014, to strengthen City finances, increase both community and private-sector asset base, economic development, improve connectivity and improve public outreach. The actions to support these goals are what will be changed to line up with the suggestions put forward by Council members.

Frye and Asson will work together to craft the document, which will include objectives that are measurable and tied to specific projects and funding options. Their draft will be reviewed by the entire Council.

The City’s general fund is

projected to have a net loss from operations of about \$17,322, which is significantly less than the budgeted loss of \$270,856. Revenues are expected to exceed budget by about \$214,585. The water fund is expected to be \$45,415 ahead of budget due to higher revenue and lower overall expenses. With increased revenues and expenses, the street fund balance is expected to be approximately the same as originally budgeted. The sewer fund is projected to be approximately \$43,475 ahead of budget.

Public works continues to be busy with a number of projects around town. With the help of a grant to cover half the cost, new restrooms with showers and bike racks will be built in Village Green Park.

A number of improvements along Hood Avenue are slated: lighting and irrigation switched from private land owners to the City; asphalt overlay of parking areas from Cedar to Pine street; parking improvements around Hood Avenue and Ash Street; and replacement of accessible ramps prior to overlay.

There are several proposed connectivity projects to create new pathways around town, which could be funded by potential grants.

A significant project coming to Sisters is the result of a combined effort on the part of EDCO, the City, ODOT, Business Oregon, and airport owner Benny Benson. The airport infrastructure/street improvement project, with a price tag of \$518,858, is directly tied to the jobs being created by ENERGYneering Solutions, which is located at the airport. Funding is partially coming from grants by the Infrastructure Opportunity Fund and Infrastructure Finance Authority (IFA), which were awarded because the project is bringing City infrastructure to support employment. The remainder of the cost will be covered by Benson.



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