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IN BRIEF

Badger blamed for break in Oregon dam

HERMISTON — A burrowing badger is being blamed for a 50-foot break in an earthen dam that sent 78 million gallons of industrial lagoon water across a road and into a tributary of the Umatilla River.

The lagoon contained processing water from the J.R. Simplot Co. potato plant, storm runoff and cooling water from a nearby energy plant.

"For the most part it was fresh water," said Fred Zerza, a Simplot spokesman in Boise. "The water itself does not appear to be contaminated."

State environmental officials advised residents not to use well water as a precaution.

Simplot offered to test about a half-dozen domestic wells in the area and made bottled water available, Zerza said.

The potato operation has been closed since November.

The dam's plastic liner gave way and the water washed out part of Oregon 207, closing it temporarily.

The lagoon is about six miles south of Interstate 84 along 207.

"An animal, probably a badger, burrowed its way through the dike and chewed into the liner, and that initiated the breach," Zerza said.

The 15-year-old lagoon was less than half full.

— The Associated Press

Neighborhood: Piercy says communication important

Continued from page 1

to make neighborhood associations more powerful and more organized.

City Councilor David Kelly, who represents the West University neighborhood and surrounding areas, said the council has not done anything more with the neighborhood initiative idea than make it a priority for the next 18 to 24 months and said councilors will discuss the idea in detail in the months to come. He said the idea is "little more than a rough goal" at the moment.

"By this being a priority issue it means that the council is very interested in having a renewed neighborhood focus," Kelly said.

West University Neighbors Chair Drix Rixmann said he has already noticed significant changes in the way the city and the neighborhoods work together, which are evident at meetings between neighborhood leaders.

He said there is already discussion about ways to increase funding for neighborhood newsletters and to make possible changes to the city's Web site to highlight the city's different neighborhoods.

Piercy said it is crucial that neighborhood meetings be a place where different opinions can be heard.

She said she hopes to give neighborhood leaders the "training they need to be able to bring out the various points of view" and to know how to handle disagreement, because "people won't keep coming if they don't feel it's a place where their voices can be heard."

Kelly said while the council currently has not done anything more than prioritize the neighborhood initiative, the most important thing for the public to keep in mind is that neighborhoods are on the council's list of priorities.

"We're at the first step of many steps here," Kelly said.

Rixmann said increasing neighborhood involvement may be the best way to combat problems in the city that some residents say have not been given the attention they deserve because of money problems.

Piercy said budget woes mean the city cannot have the large number of police officers patrolling specific areas that citizens may like to see, and Rixmann said that could be seen as another reason to increase neighborhood awareness and involvement.

"What else can you do on a budget of nothing than just have the neighbors do it themselves?" Rixmann said.

Piercy said one thing city officials may look at is a method to give neighborhood associations a formal role in planning processes and projects the City Council is examining.

Piercy said the relationship between the city and the University is an important topic and is something in which she would like to see neighborhood associations take a more active. She said one of the biggest issues she hears about is the questions surrounding the University's plans for a basketball arena.

"If it's located here then we have a high interest in how it affects our traffic flow, what kind of entrance way it makes into our community," Piercy said. "So this whole community is interested in how that plays out."

Piercy said she believes the University does a fine job of engaging the public in necessary discussion about planning projects and is hopeful the arena planning process will see heavy public involvement.

"I just hope that the University really gets engaged with people at the front end," Piercy said.

It is important for neighborhood associations to get organized and to tell city officials about specific things like the arena project that they want to be involved in, Piercy said.

"We have a responsibility, whether we hear from them or not, to do our best to engage; sometimes, though, people don't get really engaged 'til pretty far down the conversation, and I think we should be inviting them to tell us how they would like to be interacting," Piercy said.

"The stronger neighborhood associations we can have and the better we can engage them in our community's decisions, the better off we are," Piercy said.

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