

MINAM

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crashes. He said he personally responded to one fatal accident at the site and knows of other law enforcement officers, including his father, who have also worked at fatal crashes at the site.

The hairpin curve is especially hazardous because drivers come upon it quickly — and sometimes unexpectedly — while driving east and downhill.

“It catches a lot of drivers by surprise,” Routt said. “They are enjoying the scenery and don’t expect the curve.”

He said there has been an increasing need for the realignment in recent years because of an uptick in tourist traffic to Wallowa Lake. Routt said many of the tourists are first-time visitors to the area and are not aware of the hairpin curve.

Routt’s father, Bob, an OSP trooper from 1974 to 2001, said he responded to three crashes at

the hairpin curve, including one fatal accident, which was caused by defective brakes. He said his department responded to many accidents at the hairpin curve during his career.

“It got to the point that whenever there was report of crash near Minam, we knew it was at that curve,” Bob Routt said.

Capt. Robert Tibbetts of the La Grande Fire Department said there has been at least four serious crashes at the site in the past five to 10 years, and between six and seven in the last 20 to 25 years.

Tibbetts, who has worked for the La Grande Fire Department since 2003, witnessed a fatal accident there one summer in the late 1990s while driving to Wallowa County, when he saw a log truck go right through a guardrail and down an embankment. The driver of the log truck died from the injuries suffered in the accident.

Tibbetts believes there are two

primary causes of many of the accidents at the curve.

“Equipment failure and people who are driving too fast for the conditions,” he said. “It is then an unmanageable situation in terms of braking quickly enough.”

Larry Wooldridge, chief of the La Grande Rural Fire Department, also said speed is a major cause of accidents at the site. People familiar with the steep drive understand why there is a 25 mile per hour speed limit at the curve, but those who have not traveled through Minam on Highway 82 before often don’t slow down enough.

Data provided by the Oregon Department of Transportation indicates from 2007 to 2016 there were 18 crashes in the two-mile vicinity of the Minam hairpin curve. Two of the crashes were fatal and 11 involved injuries.

The contractor for the Minam Curve and Bank Stabilization Project is Tidewater Construction of Brookings. The firm will work

at least through the fall and then resume work next spring. The entire project is expected to be finished Oct. 31, 2019.

The slope stabilization portion of the project will involve repairing a road shoulder failure less than a mile from the hairpin curve. The damaged area runs 80 feet along the shoulder and extends 100 feet down the roadway to the Minam River.

All Minam Curve and Bank Stabilization Project work will be done during the daytime.

“It is safer to work during the day,” said ODOT Project Manager Mike Remily.

According to ODOT, travelers can expect crews, trucks/equipment in the area with flaggers and pilot cars controlling traffic. Traffic delays to accommodate construction and blasting activities should be less than 20 minutes long and motorists are advised to plan extra time when moving through this area.

LIBERTY

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shall be converted to a grant” and all liens or interest will be terminated.

Although these conditions were not met in their entirety, URA District Manager Robert Strope stated in a memo that because the Foundation has made significant improvements toward raising the funds necessary to complete the renovations, the URA was offering three options to the organization:

Option A: Extend the deadline without changes to the requirements.

Option B: Extend the deadline with changes to the requirements.

Option C: Replace the agreement with the deed restrictions on the use of the property.

Strope recommended the Foundation consider option C.

Information included in the URA packet indicated if the Foundation chose the third option, the URA would convert the loan, with accrued interest, to a grant in exchange for replacing the agreement with a permanent deed restriction on the property.

The restriction would require the property be used for “very specific purposes, namely those envisioned when the Agency agreed to the original funding.” Namely, the building would be used as a theater.

If the Foundation were to agree to the deed restriction, there would no longer be a deadline for the completion of the theatre’s renovations.

Another bonus would be the Foundation could use the loan-turned-grant as leverage in its fundraising efforts. Option C would also retain the URAs intent of ensuring the property is used as a theatre while removing the agency from active involvement.

Two members of the Foundation board were in attendance at Monday’s work session. Jaeger told the agency’s members the Liberty Theatre is now in its ninth year of working toward renovation, and the Foundation has every intention to restore the historic theater to its former glory and keep it as such.

Tom Farnham, who also sits on the Foundation board, noted once a project begins to receive grants and donations, people feel comfortable the project is viable and will follow suit.

“People are now interested in throwing their money in to the theatre renovation to help,” Jaeger said. “I think we have the whole formula (to fund the renovation) in place now.”

The Foundation is working to get the building to meet code requirements — which includes securing the building, improving the floor, making sure the roof is sealed and setting up a fire suppression system — so it’s in usable condition and can be used to host events.

Jaeger mentioned using the theatre building as a venue for traveling groups to perform and for showing films.

“We want to provide La Grande with a variety of options,” Jaeger said, but, he added, the Liberty would not compete with the Granada Theater or the Elgin Opera House.

The URA will make a decision about which option to go with at the September meeting.

TAX

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illegal and has retained legal counsel to challenge it. The petition, filed within seven days after the title was filed with the county clerk, claims the title filed with the Wallowa County Clerk, “Increase Transient Lodging Tax by three percent” is “Insufficient, not concise or unfair.” He believes it needs to mention 70 percent of the tax must go to supporting tourism.

Hurley believes the fairgrounds does not constitute a place that “has a substantial purpose of supporting tourism or accommodating tourist activities” as Oregon State Law 320.300 requires for any location that would receive 70 percent of the proposed transient tax increase.

While some tourists attend events at the Wallowa County Fairgrounds, Hurley doesn’t believe this constitutes a “substantial purpose.” His petition to change the ballot title would force the Wallowa County Commissioners to prove the fairgrounds has a substantial support of tourism.

He doesn’t believe they can.

According to Hurley’s petition, the ballot describing the measure “obfuscate(s) and confuse(s) the subject, chief purpose, summary and major effect of the proposed tax increase” and argues the measure’s “chief purpose is to the

fund the operations of the Wallowa County Fairgrounds, but that purpose is not in the title. Hurley’s petition said the court should modify the ballot title that includes a caption that identifies the actual subject of the measure and that increased taxes may only be used for enumerated purposes that do not include funding the Wallowa County Fairgrounds.

Velda Bales, secretary of the Wallowa County Fair Board, said the tax increase will help maintain the fairgrounds’ facilities.

Besides the annual fair, Bales said, the fairgrounds hosts a number of other events like the Juniper Jam music festival, Hells Canyon Mule Days and FFA competitions.

She said she has spoken with a number of tourists at the fair before, including people from as far away as New York.

Hurley isn’t the only one concerned about the measure. Other business owners in Wallowa County have mixed feelings about the potential increase.

Wendy Reininger has been renting out cabins outside of Enterprise since 2007 as Arrowhead Ranch Cabins, and she got set up on Airbnb in 2017. Per its website, Airbnb, Inc. is a company based in San Francisco that operates an online marketplace and hospitality service for people to lease or rent short-term lodging.” She believes

the tax increase will hurt her business.

“Most of our guests come from quite a ways away. They come from Portland, they come from Seattle, a few from the Boise area, occasionally one from beyond. It’s already a long drive and a big investment for them to come all the way out (here). My concern is, with rising gas prices, rising prices in general — they’ll decide to go somewhere else,” Reininger said.

If she were to raise her rates to compensate for the additional tax, she said, “my concern is our rate of occupancy will drop.”

That’s why Reininger said that even if the tax increase is approved by Wallowa County voters in November, she will not pass the price increase on to her customers.

“I think we would end up taking a hit,” she said. “I’m fearful that raising prices on people that much would discourage them from coming.”

Reininger, also owns Arrowhead Chocolates, which she said relies on tourism as well.

“We’re concerned there may be an impact on overall tourism in the area” Reininger said.

Bales disagrees. “People love our area, (and) they’re going to come,” she said. “I don’t think 3 percent is going to harm that.”

The proposed tax would affect only hotels, Airbnbs and other

lodging in unincorporated areas of Wallowa County. Currently, the cities of Joseph and Enterprise already have an additional 3 percent transient tax. The proposed tax increase would cause the unincorporated areas to have the same tax levels as the incorporated areas.

Anette Christoffersen is a local Airbnb owner who has rented out her property for two years. She said she didn’t think the tax would have an impact on her business.

“I think it’s fair that we pay the same as the city does,” she said. “I don’t think we’re going to get less people coming.”

She noted when she’s looking at places to stay, she often doesn’t pay attention to what the taxes are.

Hurley argues against the idea that the proposed tax increase would make the taxes equal in the cities and the incorporated areas.

“I would say that’s a bunch of bunk and a misunderstanding,” he said. “The 3 percent I pay in Enterprise is used for tourism promotion (by the City of Enterprise). The 3 percent that (would) be levied on my lake property is going to go to the fairgrounds, which isn’t going to do anything for supporting tourism at the lake.”

Reporter Katy Nesbitt contributed to this story.

GREENWAY

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route who appear to be drug addicts or of questionable character.

Chris Evans of La Grande also voiced support for the Greenway project. He said an Island City official told him the city initially received “push back” from some in the community when it expanded its network of sidewalks several years ago. Today, however, the sidewalks are a popular exercise route. He believes the Greenway project, if completed, might also defy naysayers and be well liked.

“There are trade-offs, but I believe this is a good opportunity,” said Evans, who was among about 20 people attending the hearing at Island City’s city hall.

The city council is considering three options for Phase II of the Grande Ronde Greenway Project. Tuesday’s hearing was conducted to take input on Option A. Separate hearings on Options B and C will be conducted in the next two weeks.

Option A calls for a 10-foot

wide, 6,000-foot pathway to run from the end of the existing Phase I trail east of Riverside Park to an Island City pond. The path would follow the south bank of the Grande Ronde River.

Several people told the city council they preferred Option A because they thought it would be less intrusive.

“It would have the least impact on landowners,” said Mavis Hartz of La Grande.

Option A would cost \$1.2 million, \$100,000 more than the Oregon Department of Transportation grant the City of Island City received for Phase II. Robb Rea, mayor pro tem for Island City, said there is a possibility that ODOT would make up the difference if Option A were selected.

Option B, known as the “Ditch Easement” option, will be discussed at a hearing on Aug. 28. The route follows the same path as Options A and C until it reaches private property. The pathway would then follow a ditch easement

through two to five other properties before reaching the Island City pond site.

Option C, the “Two Bridge Route,” will be discussed at the Sept. 6 hearing. This option calls for a pathway that would


follow the river until it reaches a severely eroded cut bank and a private property. At this point a bridge would be built on the north side of the river, and a second bridge would be constructed on the south side of the river

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