

LGCC

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council took public comments and suggestions from OTEC and natural gas provider Avista Utilities, the city's two largest franchise holders in terms of revenues from franchise agreements, into consideration when drafting a new version of the ordinance based on an example of a similar ordinance that passed in Grants Pass.

"There were a number of concerns raised about the licensing ordinance, and a lot of those concerns were raised by OTEC," he said. "We sat down with OTEC and (Avista), walked through the licensing ordinance, and took into account comments made by members of the community."

Strope said the projected revenues at a 7 percent licensing fee for OTEC and Avista would add up to \$250,000 per year.

After the ordinance was approved, the second reading of the OTEC franchise agreement took place.

Because OTEC's previous franchise agreement with the City of La Grande expired on Dec. 6, 2015, the two entities were operating based on the old ordinance until the new 10-year agreement passed

unanimously Wednesday evening.

This updated agreement gives OTEC the right to work on power lines, wires and other equipment required for the operation of conducting electricity "in, on and under" the city's rights-of-way areas, according to the ordinance packet.

Strope said negotiations with OTEC's franchise agreement took longer than anticipated because of varying expectations.

"There were a variety of provisions in the franchise that OTEC and the city had different perspectives on where those should end up," he said.

Although this ordinance also has to do with rights-of-way and utilities licensing, the OTEC agreement is specifically for the electric co-op, while the ordinance mentioned previously is a broader piece of legislation encompassing all utility providers in La Grande.

During the public comments section, Greg Ammer, a La Grande resident, took to the podium to ask the council about unaccounted for funds, which he said added up to "half a million dollars." After some back-and-forth with Mayor Stephen Clements on the issue, Ammer asked the council, "What do you have to hide?"

The mayor stopped Ammer

and said, "You are fishing for something that does not exist. This council and councils before it have reviewed the audit report for many years. Nothing has ever come out of those reports whatsoever that would indicate any kind of malfeasance, nor any kind of conspiracy to hide information."

Clements, in a follow-up with The Observer after the meeting, asserted, "Nobody is stealing money or doing anything inappropriate. The integrity of this council is not to be questioned."

Strope later clarified the origin of Ammer's "half a million" claim.

In the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2018, the audit reports the city had \$4.8 million in actual ending cash, \$488,816 more than what it budgeted for that year. Strope said this number is where the "half a million" figure is coming from.

However, the city manager said \$200,000 of these dollars were already dedicated to specific projects, meaning the actual amount of unanticipated funds for the 2017-2018 fiscal year totaled \$288,816.

Strope said this money resulted from a mix of tactical spending, some delays in hiring and placing new hires in previously high-paid positions with the city.

"We expected to spend more

money than we were going to bring in that year, so we thought our ending cash would go down, but it went up instead," he said. "I would say the unanticipated increase in our ending fund cash was a combination of conservative revenue estimates, conservative spending, as well as hiring lags."

The city manager said he proposed a spending approach for this \$288,816 in unanticipated funds for which he plans to ask the council to pass a resolution during the regular session in June. His proposal includes moving 50 percent of the money to general funds to be used for capital expenses like a new library roof; 25 percent to the budget of the next fiscal year; and 25 percent to increase the fund balance with no restrictions on use.

Strope said he would rather spend the unanticipated funds on capital expenses than create new positions.

"When this one-time money is gone, we'll still have to pay a salary (if we hire a new person)," he said. "We don't want to hire positions that we can't continue to fund indefinitely."

Also during the public comments section, Teresa Gustafson, a tree care educator with the city's Urban Forestry office, an-

nounced 2018 as the 27th consecutive year La Grande has been awarded the Growth Award from Tree City USA. She said this streak is the longest running in the state of Oregon.

"(This award) gives us a way to stand out for the work we've done with our urban forestry program," said Gustafson. "It also inspires us to keep moving forward because we want to maintain our record."

Following Gustafson, Stu Spence, La Grande's Parks & Recreation director, and Emma Guzman, a communications intern for the parks and rec department, provided visual updates on the ongoing construction of new dugouts and a concession stand in Pioneer Park.

Guzman said she focused on posting photos of the project on Facebook in order to provide an interactive element for the community during construction so they could see "their tax dollars at work." She and Spence said they expect the field and dugouts to be ready for the first game of the season this coming week, although the concession stand will not open until later in the season. ■

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Katie Trick/Sleep in Heavenly Peace

Katie Trick's handmade sock sloths will be available for purchase at Saturday's fundraiser to either bring home or donate to a child in the Sleep in Heavenly Peace program.

BEDS

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California. The Blue Mountain chapter is accepting monetary donations as well as donations of new bedding, lumber and twin-sized mattresses. Katie will be selling her homemade sock sloths at the fundraiser, with the option to donate them back to the program to be given to a child or to take home. The chapter is also looking for volunteers.

Sleep in Heavenly Peace holds bed-building events that anyone can attend — companies and organizations can even spon-

sor these events as team-building exercises. The beds are usually standard bunk beds, but if only one bed is needed per family, they can be delivered as singles.

The Tricks explained anyone can submit a request for a bed anywhere in the country on the Sleep in Heavenly Peace website. The Blue Mountain chapter will deliver to a very large area.

"Our chapter will cover from Joseph to Pendleton, and from Milton-Freewater to Halfway," Pete said.

The Blue Mountain chapter will be active once they build their first beds, which the Tricks said will be happening very soon as

Pete plans to build some beds with his construction crew in the next few days. They hope to have their first big build event by June 15, which is a national build day for Sleep in Heavenly Peace called "Bed across America," although they said they might have a few smaller build events before then.

The Tricks said they believe it is important to be involved in the community.

"If you can't give back then what's it worth?" Pete said. ■

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FAIR

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grounds for other events including our local 4-H and FFA leaders, kids and their families," said Horn in a letter she read aloud to the commissioners.

Horn said the work is needed because the fair had a downturn in attendance for several years before it started to rebound in 2018, when attendance jumped by about 800. Unfortunately, during the years attendance was down, upkeep on certain portions of the fairgrounds had to be put on hold.

"They were ignored and 'band-aided' to the point that they must be taken care of now or they stand to become a hazard or (could) start to affect the

event itself," Horn said. "(The payment of the insurance premium) would allow us to work on fixing those hazards."

No action was taken on UCFA's request at Wednesday's meeting, but the commissioners indicated they would discuss it at a future meeting. Before making a decision, the commissioners want to find out if proposed legislation that would significantly increase funding to county fairs in Oregon is approved by the Legislature during the current session.

"The need would not be as big (if the legislation is approved)," said Union County Commissioner Paul Anderes.

He said if the legislation is not approved, he wants the county to step up and

assist the Union County Fair Association.

"We need to support the fair association," Anderes said.

In an action item at Wednesday's meeting, the board approved a request from Union County Juvenile Department Director Ben Morgan to change the new vehicle it will purchase. The commissioners approved a request on March 20 for the purchase of a 2018 Ford Ecosport for \$23,541, but Morgan said he has since determined that the vehicle would be too small to meet the needs of his department.

Morgan asked the commissioners instead to approve the purchase of a larger 2019 Ford Escape for \$26,834, which they did. ■

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