

Local

Councilman Andersen continues efforts to clean up City's watershed

• MEETINGS HELD BETWEEN VARIOUS OFFICIALS

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Last week, Baker City Councilman and Andersen Forestry Consulting President Arvid Andersen met with Baker City Manager Fred Warner, and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Whitman District Ranger Jeff Tomac, in a continuing effort to prompt conversation and action to reach Andersen's ultimate goal: Protecting the community's drinking water by reducing fuel loads and restoring forest health in the Baker City Watershed.

On March 9th of this year, Andersen sent a letter to Warner, in which he thanked Warner for attending the "Era Of Megafires" presentation, held in La Grande, and hosted by Dr. Paul Hessburg, because Andersen was hopeful Warner would gain "...a working knowledge of forest ecology and the role fire plays in the forest."

But Andersen cautioned Warner against being overly influenced by Hessburg's presentation (which ended in a heated exchange between Andersen and Hessburg), just because Hessburg holds a PhD in Forestry.

Andersen said, "It is my personal opinion that Dr. Hessburg is overly reliant on under burning, and used climate change as an excuse for not conducting a more aggressive action to restore forest health ... Also, I was deeply disturbed by Dr. Hessburg's failure to mention or even recognize the profound negative effects that the USFS Eastside Screens have had on the current mess our National Forest timber lands are in.

"I had absolutely no idea that Dr. Hessburg was actually the author of the USFS Eastside Screens, and the 21-inch 'no cut' language.

"Our City watershed is a crown jewel, providing clean drinking water at a very reasonable price to the citizens of Baker City, Oregon.

"Currently, the fuel loads there are equal to or greater than the fuel loads that were present on Dooley Mountain, when the Cornet/Windy Ridge Wildfire occurred in 2015. A wildfire burning in the city watershed would burn with the intensity of the Cornet/Windy Ridge Wildfire fire, and would result in the need to construct an expensive \$15-20 million water treatment plant.

"The citizens of Baker City cannot afford, and should not be forced to bare, that cost, because of our lack of action on this critical issue. Endless studies and delaying the clean-up operations will

not end well!

"To effectively treat the fuel loads in the Baker City Watershed, some form of commercial tree harvest and machine piling must occur; the newly revamped pipeline road should be engineered and constructed to support log haul and the use of logging machinery.

"Given the multitude of having to treat a 10,000-acre watershed in the most cost effective way and shortest time possible, ground base logging operations and machine piling should be used whenever topography and environmental conditions allow ... all of us on the City Council and city staffs need to make it one of the highest priorities to work with the Willowa-Whitman National Forest staff to see that the city watershed fuel loads are reduced, and forest health is restored, to protect the Baker City Watershed."

On April 17th, Baker City Mayor Mike Downing sent a letter to Tomac, in which he asked Tomac a series of questions, in order to "... better understand the complex issues surrounding the watershed."

Downing said, "...The Baker City Council has had discussions surrounding the increased fuel loads in the Watershed and the potential for a catastrophic mega fire, which could threaten the entirety of our Watershed. One of the Council's adopted agendas for the 2017-2018 fiscal year is to work proactively with the Forest Service, and all other stakeholder, to assess the watershed conditions and work on remedying conditions that threaten the Baker City Watershed."

Downing asked Tomac three primary questions, each of which included several sub-questions.

Those primary questions were: "What does the Forest Service consider to be the forest health conditions of the Baker City Watershed from the perspective of Fire Management? What analysis of the Baker City Watershed does the Forest Service have? Please identify for the Baker City Council any constraints which impede treatment plans for forest restoration and fire resiliency in the Baker City Watershed."

Tomac sent a letter to Downing on June 29th, he apologized for the delay in responding to Downing, he reviewed various documents in preparation, and he said, "Foremost, I do recognize the importance of the watershed supplying clean drinking water for residents of Baker City. I also agree with your statement regarding the increased fuel loading in the watershed, along with the potential for a fire that could threaten the watershed we all value."

In response to Downing's first question, "What



Gina K. Swartz / The Baker County Press

Arvid Andersen began calling for watershed cleanup to prevent a megafire shortly after his swearing-in, shown here.

does the Forest Service consider to be the forest health conditions of the Baker City Watershed, from the perspective of Fire Management?"

Tomac said, "As you have already identified, the fuel loading has increased on the watershed. The watershed vegetative cover is identified on page 8 of the WMP (the 2014 Watershed Management Plan), and includes three primary groupings, including Principal Forest Zone, Subalpine Zone, and Alpine Zone. A combination of factors, including vegetative cover (zones), topography, species composition, identified Inventoried Roadless Area, and economics, have resulted in reduced forestry management and increased fuel loading. Providing adequate, clean water, along with local resident concerns regarding fire and smoke have also reduces the ability for fuels reduction efforts, like prescribed fire."

In response to Downing's second question, "What analysis of the Baker City Watershed does the Forest Service have?"

Tomac said, "As identified on page 9 of the WMP, two analyses have been completed within or adjacent to the Watershed. These include the Washington Watershed Project FEIS (Final Environmental Impact Statement) and ROD (Record of Decision) in 1995, and the Foothills Fuels Reduction Project DM (Decision Memo) in 2004. Specific project activities are identified for both projects in the WMP."

In response to Downing's third question, "Please identify for the Baker City Council any constraints which impede treatment plans for forest restoration and fire resiliency in the Baker City Watershed,"

Tomac said, "Constraints depend on the activity proposed. Some information can be reviewed in the Watershed Conditions

section, on pages 20-27, in the WMP."

All of Tomac's responses included more detail, to also address Downing's sub-questions.

In conclusion, Tomac said, "In 2014, the Forest Service worked with Baker City to update the WMP, to foster effective, economical, and equitable management of water, and ensure the continued protection of the Baker City Watershed, to provide clean drinking water to stakeholders, and support functions of the environment by strengthening existing management measures, creating strategies, to mitigate risks to the Watershed, and implementing a framework to adapt to new challenges. My staff and I have met with Baker City staff over the past couple of years, considering options for potential fuel reduction projects within or adjacent to the Watershed. I am available to meet to review maps and options. I am also available to participate in a City Council meeting...I value the partnership we have with Baker City, and will continue to work with you on management of the watershed."

Andersen spent most of an hour last week speaking with Warner and Tomac about the conditions in the watershed, about reducing fuel loads and restoring forest health, and about what projects could and could not be completed, including the associated timing with those.

Andersen said, via email, "I really care about forest health. I am profoundly unhappy about seeing my National Forest burn up, and my private landowner clients get burned out by fires staring on USFS ground..."

He wants to spread the word about the issues, "...and support WNF (Willowa-Whitman National Forest) to do the right thing—protect our Baker City drinking water."

'Blithe Spirit' to begin in Oct. at EORT

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Eastern Oregon Regional Theater presents "Blithe Spirit" by Noël Coward. The play will be directed by Scot Violette.

According to the play description, "The smash comedy hit of the London and Broadway stages, this much-revived classic from the playwright of Private Lives offers up fussy, cantankerous novelist Charles Condomine, remarried but haunted (literally) by the ghost of his late first wife, the clever and insistent Elvira who is called up by a visiting 'happy medium,' one Madame Arcati. As the personalities clash, Charles' current wife Ruth is accidentally killed, 'passes over', joins Elvira and the two 'blithe spirits' haunt the hapless Charles into perpetuity."

Violette had decided to direct this play around a year ago in September.

"One of my favorite plays in the world is done by Neil Simon," explained Violette. "He wrote a play called 'Jakes Women' and it's a great play, I played Jake years ago, and it's about a writer who is going crazy and seeing people that don't exist anymore and having conversations with them. Well, in that play, Jake—the lead character in the play—tells his dead wife 'Let's not turn this into a Noël Coward tribute.' That reference is to 'Blithe Spirit', Noël Coward wrote 'Blithe Spirit' that's about a guy who talks to his dead wife. Neil Simon basically stole the plot from 'Blithe Spirit.' That's one of the reasons and, two, I love British comedies. I absolutely love British comedies, and it's a classic."

Violette explained that Noël Coward wrote the play during the blitz of World War II.

"He was living in London at the time," said Violette. "He moved north to get away from the bombs, and it was such horrible times for the people in London, he wanted to write a play that would lift their spirits. So, he wrote, 'Blithe Spirits.'"

The play will be performed in the Basche Sage Mall Friday, October 20-22 and 27-29 at 7:00 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3:00 p.m. Sundays.

Planning Commissioner investigated

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Kitzmiller frowned upon the idea of using an engineer inspecting the work after it's completed and covered, because the engineer couldn't necessarily see any more than the Building Department could.

She said that, if the Crawfords agree to get the additions permitted, in addition to the normal permit fees, the Crawfords would pay Building Department investigation fees, which are at actual cost. For example, if Hall had to make one extra visit to the property, and only one certified letter was necessary to be sent to the Crawfords, the extra cost could be around just \$70.

Kitzmiller said, "The Building Department, and the Planning Department are always happy to be of assistance for property owners that want to make improvements to their property. Our Department is governed by the State laws, so at this point, if a violation is determined to exist, we will begin the process to attempt to bring the property into compliance. The very first thing that will have to happen, is a zoning approval applied for and received.

"Then, the Building Department can determine a path to bring the structural, plumbing, electrical, and mechanical additions/changes into compliance. If the property owner is not willing to do so, then violations would be submitted, and the legal process would begin."

At this point in the process, Kitzmiller said, there is an open investigation, based on the reported conditions from multiple complainants.

Kitzmiller, who has worked as Permit Technician for the City for the last two and a half years, is a homeowner herself, and sees both sides of the issue.

She noted that there are some shoddy contractors out there, and much misinformation and lack of information, but she said, "The Oregon building code law—in most cases—they do it for a reason, and it's not that hard to comply."

She said, citing one example of common confusion with differences in location and what's required, "The building code is exactly the same, for people in the City, and the County (and Statewide)...What changes is the development code—planning, not building." She said that there are additional City ordinances, but neither the City Manager, nor the City Council or the County Commissioners, for that matter, could overrule the building codes.

She said that there's a common misconception that the Building Department is "...out to permit you to death. The reality is, that we're busy—we don't need to make you get a permit, if you don't need one. We can only enforce Oregon building code law, and we don't want to make you get a permit, if one's not required, we don't want to inspect your place, if we don't need to ...

"If you want to do an addition, we want you to do an addition. If you want to do an addition, we want you to do it legally ...We want to do what we're supposed to for you. We want to be consistent and predicable, for the people we serve."

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