

City of Vernonia Embarks on Long-Term Public Works Study

By Jim Tierney, Chair of the Vernonia Public Works Committee

During the last year, the City Council and our current administration have made a number of improvements in how we make decisions about public works projects. One example is the formation of the Public Works Committee last spring. Another is that we are working to help the City make its public works decisions in context.

During the last two months, Dick Kline has been discussing Vernonia's public works infrastructure with Dale Merrill of CIDA, a civil engineering firm. Merrill and Mike Gilliland, a landscape architect who works with him, have been highly recommended to the city as professionals who understand the needs and constraints of small towns. Kline's goal is to work with CIDA to develop a workplan for a small short-term engineering study that will detail the condition of our existing infrastructure. The study will include an outline of necessary improvements to our systems, the cost of those improvements, and data to help us set priorities. Once we have the work plan and a cost estimate, we can find a funding source and follow the necessary process to hire an engineer.

We need the study to help us make good choices. Most of you know that the city is under order from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to make further improvements to our sewer treatment system. The cost of these required improvements is estimated as high as \$9 million. We have recently applied for, and received, a five-year extension on DEQ's demand. Given the enormous cost of the proposed sewer improvements, Kline felt it essential that we fully understand all of our needs before we start such an expensive project. The Public Works Committee agrees that we need the baseline data that the study will provide.

The study will be comprehensive. Obviously, the sewer treatment system is on the list. The engineer will also look at our water plant and distribution system, our storm water collection and disposal system, plus our streets and sidewalks. The study will help your Public Works Committee do its job by giving us baseline data in each of these areas. We will use that data to develop improvement plans for each of these systems. These plans will include:

- an inventory of our existing systems

- a comprehensive list of the improvements needed over the next twenty to forty years
- the cost of those improvements
- a plan to pay for the improvements

Using this knowledge, we can help the administration and the City Council keep costs to ratepayers and taxpayers as low as possible.

We hope to use the five-year delay to pare down the enormous cost of the sewer project. We also believe it's an excellent idea to have a second set of experts review the problem and the proposed solution -- similar to seeking a second doctor's opinion.

This proposed study is just one example of the improved public involvement and smart decision-making that will serve all Vernonians well. As we learn more, I will write additional articles about our community's public works systems, our ideas to improve the city's infrastructure, and how citizens can weigh in on our choices.

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