

Water and Sewer Rate Update

Vernonia water and sewer customers will see an adjustment on their next bill

By Ben Fousek

A Brief History and a Philosophy

In 2012 the City hired an outside firm to evaluate our water rates, and suggest new rate structures, with accompanying rates based on the use patterns at that time. In 2015 the City went through the same process for sewer rates. In both cases, the City adopted rate structures which are a good fit for the size and use patterns of our water and sewer systems (more on those rate structures below).

Despite having good rate structures in place, the City could have done better by regularly evaluating, and making proper rate changes as our use patterns and economy changed.

The options for evaluating rates are to hire an outside firm or have the capacity within City Hall to fundamentally understand the rate structures, maintain accurate use data, and propose appropriate rate changes. In 2016 City staff and the Public Works Committee decided on the latter to save the cost of expensive outside consulting, and create a deep institutional knowledge of how our utility rates work.

As we undertook this process, we needed a guiding principal to check our efforts against as we moved forward. Public Works Committee member Dale Webb made a point of regularly asking, "What is our utility rate philosophy?" After many discussions and debates, a few core ideas and values came to the surface. Provide the community with simple, fair, budget-driven utility rates. Simple to understand and administer; fair to all of our customers; and based solely on budgets to promote rate stability and transparency.

2018 marks the second year of the ad hoc Utility Rate Review Committee, which convenes every March-April to evaluate changes in last year's use pat-

terns to current rates, inform the budget process, and recommend rate changes to City Council.

Rate Structure

The City utilizes a Base + Consumption rate structure for both water and sewer rates. The concept behind this rate structure is to generate enough revenue to cover the cost of maintaining the systems, regardless of customers consuming water or putting wastewater into the sewer, with flat base rates, while generating the remainder of the budgets through consumptive charges to cover the variable costs of production and delivery of water, and treatment of wastewater.

The base rates are an equal distribution across all customers, and consumptive rates charge each customer based on individual consumption. The current water rate is split 77%-23%, and the current sewer rate is split 70%-30%. Base-consumptive splits are somewhat subjective, however a review of fixed and variable costs of the water and sewer budgets at the line-item level are in line with these base-consumptive splits. Water consumption is monthly gallonage registered through a water meter. Sewer consumption is based on the four previous winter months (Nov-Feb) of water consumption.

Water and sewer loans are a separate component of utility rates. Loans are distributed equally in the same manner as base rates. Base rates and loans are multiplied by a meter multiplier based on meter size. 94% of our water system meters are 3/4" meters, with a multiplier of 1. Larger meters pay more based on cost and capacity ratios. A 2" meter for example, pays 2.9 times the base and loan rates.

The End of Water Allowance

A significant change in our rate structure beginning here in July is the elimination of water consumption allowance. All 3/4" meters have received a 2,000 gallon water allowance every month before being charged for

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UNWC Culvert Project Will Improve Fish Habitat

By Scott Laird

A project to replace a culvert on Apiary Road that will allow better fish passage will close the road for a month starting August 27. Local watershed advocates think the inconvenience is worth the significant impact and overall benefits the project will have on wildlife habitat and local fish populations.

Maggie Peyton is the Executive Director of the Upper Nehalem Watershed Council (UNWC). "We know shutting down the road will impact people, especially the timber industry," said Peyton during a recent interview. "They use that road a lot. We are concerned about how it affects the community and business. It was determined that a safe detour or onsite by-pass is not possible near the construction site." She further explained, "We worked diligently for eight years with Columbia County Road Department, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Lower Columbia Engineering, UNWC Board of Directors, funders, and technical advisors to develop a cost effective project design that meets state and federal fish passage standards and could be installed in a timely manner limiting local impacts."

The project will replace a 125 foot long undersized metal culvert at mile post 16.1 on Apiary Road (river mile 3.5 on Oak Ranch Creek) with a pre-cast, reinforced concrete, open bottomed arch designed by CONTECH. The current culvert is completely impassable to juvenile fish and only passable by adult fish under the right flow

conditions. The current small culvert and deep road fill also restricts stream flow and sediment transport, and wildlife migration along the creek.



The culvert was previously replaced in February of 1996 following heavy rains that created stream flooding that backed up behind the stream crossing and washed out the road.

"In this case, it really is necessary and has needed to be done right since 1996 when the road blew out and the County had to do an emergency replacement," explains Peyton. "It was initially semifunctional but over time it became a barrier to fish passage due mostly to stream erosion caused by restriction."

The project is being funded by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW). The UNWC secured the funding and engineering for the project, the Columbia County Road Department will manage the construction. The actual work will be completed by Kynsi Construction from Clatskanie.

The project will provide

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New Owners Reopen Automotive Shop

Josh and Tera Rullmann have opened AV Automotive Repair in Vernonia at 745 Adams Avenue.

Formerly the home of Ward Mobile Shop and Services, the Rullmanns say they will be making a few changes, but will also be offering many of the same services already in place.

The Rullmanns have purchased the business from owner Reggie Ward, after spending about three weeks working with him and learning how he ran his business.

"We're doing our best to try and carry on everything Reggie was doing here, including his relationships with his customers and the business he built," says Tera. "We'll be honest with people and try to keep things local. We'll work with other shops here in town if we need to. We hope people

will give us a chance and help us get started."

In addition to auto repair services, AV Automotive Repair will continue to offer propane, the self-serve car wash and vacuum, and auto detail services. Tera and Josh say they are working to clean up the shop and make it their own.

Tera and Josh, along with son Eli, moved to Vernonia about two years ago from Oklahoma, where Josh was stationed and served in the U.S. Army, working in artillery.

Josh has a fairly extensive background working on all kinds of



cars. "He's very creative," says Tera. "If there's a problem that needs to be solved, he's able to adapt and figure it out. He's always worked on his own cars, and then we met Reggie while trying to help a local with a difficult auto

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