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EUGENE Weekly

news BY ALAN PITTMAN

'Stinking Albatross'

The WEP is starting to smell like it's already dead.

Even some of the West Eugene Parkway's biggest boosters are starting to sound like they don't want the project now.

Eugene Mayor Jim Torrey, a long-time WEP booster, said at a council meeting Sept. 22 that the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) had done Eugene a "disservice" by dragging out the final parkway decision for so long. Torrey said dedicating money to the WEP had diverted money from projects like relieving congestion on Beltline Highway. Torrey said Beltline, not the WEP, is the city's "number one" need for road improvements.

"We've lost numerous opportunities," Torrey said. "You [ODOT] need to let us know sooner rather than later whether or not this [WEP] project is going to happen."

At the council meeting, the focus of Torrey and other WEP supporters appeared to center on not whether the WEP will be built, but whether ODOT or the city will get the blame for killing it. Torrey said if the city rather than ODOT is blamed for killing the project, the agency may decide it "can't do business with the city of Eugene."

said he hopes ODOT will later agree to pay for construction and maintenance of the roadway.

Torrey admitted that he personally campaigned for the WEP three years ago with promises that the state will pay to build and maintain all of the roadway. "I'm not about to take back something I said. I said it."

WEP critics pointed out that ODOT's request for a jurisdiction switch contradicts earlier positions taken by the state agency.

Councilor Scott Meisner pointed out ODOT recently refused to allow dedicated bus rapid transit lanes on Route 126 through the city because of state highway standards. Now, the agency wants to dump those congestion standards for 126 on the west side of town.

Councilor David Kelly pointed out that ODOT earlier rejected proposals to build half the parkway and rely on city streets for the remainder because streets under local jurisdiction wouldn't meet its standards. "Now ODOT's own proposal doesn't meet ODOT standards," Kelly said.

Bettman said if the WEP is built, the new local street "highway" will be a "stone's

'This project has turned into a stinking albatross that now not even the state wants to take responsibility for.'

— COUNCILOR BONNY BETTMAN

Councilor Gary Papé, another long-time WEP booster, said the city should support the project "and not be the scapegoat" for killing it.

Rob Zako, a local transportation advocate for 1000 Friends of Oregon, says it now looks as if no one wants the WEP, but none want the blame for killing it.

Zako shakes his head about the mayor finally admitting that the wetlands highway is diverting money from higher priority road needs. "Duh. That was what this was all about."

"This is what the anti-WEP people have been saying all along," said Councilor Bonny Bettman.

Zako pointed out the same Beltline project that Torrey now says is a higher priority was sidelined by the mayor and other WEP supporters three years ago when they pushed to cancel their funding in favor of building the WEP.

If the city had canceled the WEP three years ago and focused on alternatives, "we would have been 75 percent into correcting the [traffic] problems out there" in west Eugene, Bettman said. "This project has turned into a stinking albatross that now not even the state wants to take responsibility for."

Bettman was referring to the subject of the council meeting last week: commenting on ODOT's proposal to transfer responsibility for the eastern half of the WEP to the city. ODOT says it needs the transfer to get around regulations that forbid spending federal money on a new highway that is projected to be overly congested.

City Manager Dennis Taylor said he planned to sign an agreement with ODOT to talk about the transfer of jurisdiction. Taylor

throw" from existing underused streets. "It's ridiculous."

Bettman also questioned whether the new "half a WEP" proposal will require a new round of lengthy legal approvals for the project. "That is a very, very different project."

Kelly says the WEP also has far bigger problems. He pointed to opposition by the BLM to building a parkway through federally acquired parkland full of rare wetlands and species. He questioned how a street under local jurisdiction could serve as a highway given that the city lacks the ability to prevent the road from clogging with business driveways. Kelly said it will be difficult to decide what additional road projects to cancel to fund the WEP's spiraling price tag, now estimated at \$130 million, up about \$30 million from just three years ago.

"This plan is too much money for too little effect," Meisner, once the key swing vote for the WEP, now says.

Council concerns drew blank looks and few answers from city staff, once among the WEP's most important boosters. At one point, Eugene Public Works Director Kurt Corey described the WEP approval process as a many-tentacled octopus.

Councilor Nancy Nathanson, a staunch WEP supporter, said she's disappointed and fears the project is caught in an "endless loop" of regulations with ODOT not moving forward. "It seems the state in some cases has put a hold on this."

That may be wise considering the recent election of a new mayor and council majority openly opposed to the controversial wetland highway. What if the new council votes against the WEP in January?

"I don't know," says ODOT project leader Karl Wieseke. **EW**

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