

CRITICS OF CITY FEE GETTING ORGANIZED

Claiming support from both liberals and conservatives, a small group of Eugene citizens has organized a Political Action Committee (PAC) to campaign against Ballot Measure 20-211, the proposed fees for city residences and business that will be on the ballot in May.

Citizens for Truth, Justice, and the American Way (CiT-JAW) has a website at votencityfee.org and the PAC directors are Bonny Bettman McCornack and Paul Nicholson, both former city councilors. David Monk is the treasurer.

City Manager Jon Ruiz told City Club of Eugene in January that the city anticipates a \$6 million deficit next year in the general fund. "We are exploring new revenue sources in order to go forward," he said. After extensive opinion polling last fall, city staff came up with proposals for both an additional stormwater fee and a five-year tax levy, but the City Council decided to narrow it down to a monthly fee of up to \$10 on dwelling units and a \$30 monthly fee on businesses, ideally to be added to EWEB utility bills. Some low-income households will be exempt from the fee, but the details have not yet been worked out.

On the record supporting the fee at this point are Mayor Kitty Piercy and Councilors Alan Zelenka, George Brown, Claire Syrett and Chris Pryor. Popular social service and public safety programs are on the chopping block if the measure fails.

No PAC has yet formed to support the fee measure, but CiTJAW appears to be gaining ground. "Surprisingly, we are building a coalition of both D's and R's," says Bettman McCornack. "We are looking forward to multiple opportunities to shed some light on this unprecedented money measure, and the city's convoluted priorities."

Bettman McCornack says the PAC will be raising a number of issues on what she calls a "regressive piece of work." She says city revenues are going up each year, but the city councilors who are supporting this measure don't really understand the budget and where the reserves are that can be tapped. "The budget is less opaque now than when I was

on the council," she says.

"Why are the senior staff getting COLA [Cost of Living Adjustment] increases?" she asks. "We need to rethink how government works."

The group will be focusing on the city's untapped millions of dollars in fund balances and reserves scattered through various city departments, the need to sunset Eugene's ongoing tax breaks for developers, the need to examine city management pay and staffing and unresolved issues on how the fees will be collected and who will qualify for exemption.

"There's no hidden money or pot of gold to be tapped," says Councilor Pryor, and Mayor Piercy agrees. "We've worked nonstop for four years to deal with the revenue issues

and the city now has 100 fewer employees," she says. The city still has 1,445 FTE employees. Salem, with a nearly identical population, has 1,158 career employees plus 164 temporary employees limited to 1,200 hours a year.

The projected cuts to social and human services and public safety "are not a threat, they are reality," says Councilor Zelenka. "These services go away July 1 if the vote fails."

"It's a false choice," says Bettman McCornack. "Maybe if the public refuses to repeatedly bail them out, City Hall will get motivated to pursue critical tax reforms here at home and statewide." — *Ted Taylor*

'There's no hidden money or pot of gold to be tapped.'

— COUNCILOR CHRIS PRYOR

4J BOARD FACES HIGH 'LEVEL OF SKEPTICISM' TO SCHEDULE CHANGE

Eugene's District 4J School Board agreed last week to convene a work session this week to address issues that have arisen over moving all district high schools to a common 3x5 schedule. The proposal to address the schedule change came after the Eugene Education Association (EEA) asked the board to postpone the move, citing opposition by a majority of high school teachers. More than two dozen parents, teachers and students spoke against the change at a packed meeting. The board also addressed the latest budget shortfall

projections and proposed cuts to a number of programs.

At the March 6 meeting, Superintendent Sheldon Berman said he had sent staff "a hard email" on the 2013-14 budget. Legislators are seeking increased funds for schools, but the district still faces cuts of about \$10 million on top of steady reductions for more than two decades.

"Given all the reductions made in the past 20 years, we have few avenues available to us for further cutbacks," Berman wrote in the email. "None of the proposals for reductions that have been put forward are ones we desire. They are all exceptionally painful."

Proposals to be decided by June include eliminating central office library support, restructuring health centers and nursing services and reducing professional development. "Even given these severe measures, we are likely to see increases in class size and potentially have an even shorter school year," Berman wrote.

EEA President Tad Shannon shared petitions signed by those opposed to the schedule change: 91 percent of teachers at North Eugene High School, 81 percent of teachers at Sheldon High School, and 74 percent of teachers at South Eugene High School; 79 percent of International High School (IHS) teachers previously signed a letter to the board.

"I would urge you to think about what the ramifications of this level of skepticism means among the staff and the trained professionals that will ultimately be the ones who will be operating under this schedule," Shannon said. "We hope that you will have the courage to step back like you did with the middle school decision and give it a little more time until we can either demonstrate that the 3x5 in fact works and then begin to win the trust of staff, or to abandon the notion of imposing a standardized schedule on all schools altogether."

Under the new schedule, students who want to take rigorous academic courses such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) would have to choose between those courses and music classes or other electives. "Should any student have to make this choice?" asked Tracy Ross, band director at Sheldon.

Selena Blick, a junior at Churchill, which went to the 3x5 this year, and an IHS student, said she had a full year of music previously but now can take only a trimester. "Students take band to be part of a community and it is important that this same community is maintained throughout an entire year," she said.

Board Member Jim Torrey proposed a work session to "look at where we are in the implementation process for the



HAPPENING PEOPLE

BY PAUL NEEVEL

CARLOS BARRERA

A native of Mission, Texas, Carlos Barrera traces his family history back to Spanish colonial times in the mid-1600s. "Half the town is related to me," he says. "The Rio Grande River is three miles away." After earning a bachelor's in fine arts from Pan American University in nearby Edinburg, Barrera became an electrician and an electrical contractor. He worked three years in Austin, then 21 years in the San Francisco Bay Area. "I was the go-to person for historical renovation," he says. "I replaced old wiring in historic houses." Tired of the big-city rat race, he moved to Eugene in 1999. "I essentially retired and got involved in social issues," says Barrera, who joined the successful effort to block a proposed National Guard Armory near wetlands close to LCC. "They moved to Springfield instead." He also joined his local neighborhood association, Friendly Area Neighbors (FAN), and has now served eight years as its co-chair. "We had a long battle with EWEB to keep the College Hill Reservoir open to the public," he says. Barrera represents FAN on the Neighborhood Leaders Council. He is a board member of Beyond Toxics and attends meetings of activist groups LandWatch Lane County and Friends of Civic Stadium. "In California, I was working full-time," he notes. "Now, I take a major interest in social equity. I sometimes have 15 hours of meetings in a week."

Know anyone whose good work deserves attention in this space? Call the editor at 484-0519 or editor@eugeneweekly.com