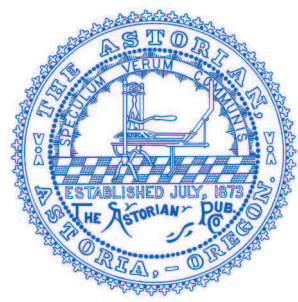


THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



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OUR VIEW

ODOT needs more accountability, and better procedures

Those who proclaim government agencies should be run like businesses are, in some ways, wrong.

A case in point: If government services and infrastructure were awarded to low-population areas in proportion to the income they produce, large swaths of America wouldn't have paved roads, bridges or anything but one-room schools. Basic politic principles and simple fairness would never allow such overt neglect in the U.S.

When it comes to the Oregon Department of Transportation, however, a valid argument definitely can be made for a somewhat more businesslike approach to such fundamental procedures as setting priorities, seeking out differing opinions and measuring how well goals are being achieved.

With a budget of roughly \$2 billion a year and thousands of employees, ODOT is one of the state's largest organizations. It's no Nike or Intel, but it's big enough — and so crucial to the state's safety and success — that it must adopt at least some lessons from the private corporate world in order to achieve all it needs to do with the resources it has available. It wants even more. ODOT, along with Oregon's counties and cities, suggests they might need up to an extra \$5 billion a year to preserve roads and bridges, ease congestion and bolster public transportation.

A nearly \$1 million performance audit from New York-based McKinsey & Co. — which the EO Media Group/Pamplin Media Group Capital Bureau successfully pressed ODOT to release last month — found the department acts like a complacent family. Nobody in top management rocks the boat by questioning the agency's decisions. Though the audit is couched in the diplomatic code phrases of managerial consultants, the overall picture of top ODOT management is uncomfortably close to the old cliché of a clubby circle of friends standing around leaning on their shovels kibitzing.

No dissenting voices

Consultant interviews with senior management found “no example of individuals who considered themselves a ‘dissenting voice.’” Government agencies, boards and commissions often go to great effort to ensure such a lack of disagreement within their ranks. However, from a public perspective, too many unanimous decisions within an entity like ODOT are nearly always a sign of trouble. It means no one is really speaking up to question old assumptions or fight for significant changes in important matters.

In the case of Oregon's transportation system, ODOT's management team is supposed to be accountable to the five-member governor-appointed Oregon Transportation Commission.

However, this effort at citizen oversight is not functioning as it should. On Jan. 10, Tammy Baney, the commission's chairwoman, sent Gov. Kate Brown a letter asking for quarterly meetings with Brown, along with an independent staff person to carry out commissioners' requests for information and research. Baney also wants an “active” role in ODOT Director Matt Garrett's performance review. Most Oregon citizens will be surprised that such basic elements of independent oversight are not already in place. Without routine contact with the governor or a role in reviewing the ODOT director, the commission becomes little but a symbolic shell.

Lack of trust

Former commission Chairwoman Catherine Mater said the request for an independent staffer indicates “a complete disintegration of trust” between ODOT and the commission tasked with overseeing it.

ODOT's front-line workers clearly understand what is going on. They told the consultants: “We need to ensure accountability for performance and behavior problems ... High-level managers can talk the talk, but poor performers and poor behavior is still tolerated ... Good employees currently work hard through internal motivation and personal dedication to high quality service, not because the agency rewards them.”

There is no doubt that Oregon needs substantial transportation upgrades and maintenance. During a recent visit to Astoria, outgoing Port of Portland Executive Director Bill Wyatt emphasized what most residents already know: Surrounding states invest more heavily in highways, bridges and other essential infrastructure. Though Wyatt understandably focuses on obvious needs in the Portland metro region, he is largely right in asserting that it is a bottleneck that must be fixed to ensure a healthy future for the state's economic engine.

Ultimately, even if Congress grants President Donald Trump's wish for major national infrastructure spending, Oregon taxpayers will have to pay much of the tab. Deficiencies in ODOT's management system necessitate a convincing and thorough rebooting of this critical agency's managerial and oversight procedures.

It will be a fool's errand to ask Oregon voters for a major hike in transportation-related taxes until this basic work is done and trust is restored.



SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Shouting ‘Fire!’ in Gearhart

By R.J. MARX
The Daily Astorian

While the Gearhart Firehouse may look just fine to the casual observer, for firefighters and the community, the building is a disaster waiting to happen: seismically unable to survive a Cascadia quake, too small to accommodate modern equipment and inadequate to provide shelter or a gathering space after a natural disaster.

Volunteer firefighter Josh Como was among others at a January volunteer appreciation night to voice their support for a new building.



“Whether it's for ease and accessibility for people to get in and out or to store equipment, right now we're maxed out on lockers to have people store their gear,” Como said. “We don't have space for any more new people or even to have drills.”

“Infrastructure is huge for Gearhart now,” Mayor Matt Brown said. “We have to make sure we protect our firefighters.”

During his 2016 campaign, Brown said a new firehouse would be a top city priority. “It's pretty dire,” fire committee co-chairman Jay Speakman said. “This station was built in the late 1950s by local volunteer labor that came and did most of the work themselves.”

The structure was constructed using hollow tile and cinder block, long before the impacts of a Cascadia Subduction Zone event were known. “It's been determined that any reasonably sized earthquake will possibly collapse the building,” Speakman said. “We've got many hundreds of thousands of dollars of equipment in this building and it would not be prudent to jeopardize that by having a building that's not stable.”

Committee member Gary Gillam pointed to a cornerstone with a dedication date of 1958. “We have to create something for these guys that addresses the needs of today,” Gillam said. “It's sagging about 5 inches and we have a lake every time it rains hard.”

Brown, former Mayor Dianne Widdop, along with councilors like committee co-chairwoman Sue Lorain and councilor Dan Jesse, have called the firehouse the city's most pressing issue.

The current building, Lorain said, is “not only a piece of junk at the present time, if we get a new building, it would enhance our city even more.”

The endgame, Lorain said, might be to locate the new building out of the tsunami zone. “When we first started the committee a year ago, we all had a tour of the fire hall,” she said. “We learned about the cinder blocks that are cracking, we learned about the walls that are crumbling inside. It's not such a different scenario from the schools.”

Learning from the school bond When Gearhart voted in 2006 on a \$3.75 million general obligation bond measure to address the problem, the proposal included plans for a high-end building to house the police department, City Hall and fire station. “Several years ago there was a bond issue put together by the fire department with no citizen input at all,” City Administrator Chad Sweet said. “To a lot of people it seemed to be extremely expensive with a lot of bells and whistles that may not have been necessary.”



R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian

Josh Como, Lori Lum, Gary Gillam, Mayor Matt Brown and Sue Lorain at the Gearhart Fire Department's appreciation night.

The vote that year was 327-231, with 58 percent of residents voting against it.

Sweet, the city's liaison to the firehouse committee, said he believes if the city had asked for a fire station alone in 2006, voters would have approved it. “One of the issues we found by adding the City Hall as part of the construction that it politicized the issue,” he said this week. “This time we're exploring an approach to just replace the fire station.”

But a second vote has waited more than 10 years as other pressing economic and infrastructure needs siphoned attention.

Add to that the \$99.7 million Seaside bond last year to move district schools — including Gearhart Elementary School — out of the tsunami zone, and a new firehouse again got pushed to the back burner.

That bond, like the firehouse bond, had been put in front of voters in 2013 when it was proposed on a grander scale. At \$128.8 million, voters said not only “no,” but “hell no.”

‘We have to create something for these guys that addresses the needs of today.’

Gary Gillam
 fire committee member

However, Seaside officials, students and community members knew that this wasn't a matter of if, but when — and fashioned the new bond to show greater economy of scale. The summer and fall was spent raising support for the measure — which ultimately won convincing approval.

Some of the same voices involved in the school bond are seeking a safer Gearhart as members of the fire safety committee. “I am on the fire safety committee,” said Lori Lum Toyooka, who was also active in the school district's “Vote Yes for Our Local Schools” group. “The building is old and needs to be updated to current modern standards.”

During last fall's campaign, advocates of the new campus took the case not only to parents but to retirees, families without children, vacation property owners and other stakeholders who may have been neglected during the 2013 bond

campaign.

“Because I worked on the school bond issue with Lori and others, we should go to school with what the school bond people did with a lot of the grassroots meetings in homes,” Gillam said. “It really helped this time, as opposed to when it went down three years ago.”

Details await

The firehouse committee was appointed in September 2015, tasked to examine the problem and come up with solutions.

The committee looked at seven possible sites, both city and private property, including the current location. “We created a matrix to grade all of these sites,” Speakman said. “We started with geology and some of them were eliminated right away, because they were close to water.”

Sites with low elevation and unstable soils were also removed from consideration.

Locations were prioritized by distance from the general population, accessibility for fire volunteers and “survivability.”

While the report is not yet public, Speakman said the group “went wide” in their search, considering the current Pacific Way location, the Highlands, east of the highway and on higher ground within the city.

“The bottom line is we want a building that is survivable after a good-sized earthquake that could be followed by a tsunami,” Speakman said.

In response to the 2006 bond defeat, committee members this time around have decided to concentrate on a public safety building which would include fire and police, Speakman said. “We decided this existing city hall could be renovated, which could save a lot of money right up front.”

“Last time the volunteers and the city worked up a plan, the residents weren't very much a part of the discussions,” Sweet said. “This time a group of residents have come together to discuss the issue and bring this up as a grassroots effort.”

As for costs, “We don't have a number,” Speakman said. “We're still in the exploration phases. We do have an architect and we do have a grant from the city.”

The question is: Is there a civic will for a new construction project?

For firefighters and the community they protect, it can't come soon enough.

R.J. Marx is *The Daily Astorian's* South County reporter and editor of the *Seaside Signal* and *Cannon Beach Gazette*.