

Gearhart: City's wildlife population has become a heated issue

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"The park was decided to the city by the county as a park, and it should be continued as a park," he said.

The cost of new infrastructure at that site could be prohibitive, he added.

Zimmerman suggested a new building at the fire station's current site, which already has infrastructure.

A new building could be constructed to "withstand various scenarios."

Smith countered that building the firehouse at its current site could prove even more expensive, with a temporary structure needed during construction and work needed to backfill unstable ground.

"The park doesn't have that problem and neither does 'High Ground,'" Smith said, referring to a third site on North Marion under consideration.

"There are issues with both of them," Smith continued. "Nobody wants to lose a park and it's going to be more expensive — but those two sit on stable dunes."

Growth

Both candidates said they share a love for the city and a passion for its protection.

Smith said the city must comply with state regulations that require Gearhart to maintain a 20-year inventory of buildable lots. "The state has notified the city that we need to comply with this requirement," he said.

New development could provide workforce housing, which could prove a boon for the city and region, he added.

As a "no-growth" candidate, Zimmerman said an expansion of the city's urban growth boundary would create higher density, require more services, employees and costs.

"How much do you want to put on the back of the taxpayers?" he asked. "Gearhart doesn't necessarily want to change — I don't think anybody's made the case that Gearhart has to be dragged into the 21st century, or that Gearhart has to provide high-density apartments. Look at Portland."

Spending

Zimmerman's concern about growth spilled into his views for the city's future. The most important issue for the city, he said, is spending priorities and the impact they have on the community.

"That's especially true in terms of how much spending are you going to ultimately levy on the property taxpayer," he said.

Building fees, a septic fee or taxes on cigarettes might also "throw off excess revenues" for the city's parks and other needs, Zimmerman said.

Smith said he would seek to limit future expenses in "small ways that add up," with house-keeping cuts and tightening up of expenditures.

Money saved could be moved to the city's Community Emergency Response Team and resiliency planning, he said.

If elected, Zimmerman said the first thing he would change in Gearhart would be to open the budget process to greater scrutiny. Right now, he said, it's limited in scope.

"I'd like to see that process come into the light of day and provide an opportunity in a town hall meeting and get up and describe what they want to spend money on, why they want to spend, where they're limited," Zimmerman said. "The taxpayer who has to pay that bill should have the ability to either agree, disagree or say 'great job.'"

Smith said the process offers residents an opportunity to study the budget for 30 days before it is accepted by the council and presented for a public hearing where they can let their input be known.

Elk

With a growing elk herd and increasing encounters between elk and people, the city's wildlife population has become a heated campaign issue.

Residents and businesses complain about the loss of plantings, damage to lawns, and hazardous meetings between the herd and visitors.

Smith is in favor of an ordinance under consideration that would prohibit feeding wild-

life. "No feeding is the first step we can take to stop the habituation of elk-human interaction," he said.

Culling the herd should be a last measure, he said, with sharpshooters or bow hunters tracking the animals outside of city limits.

Zimmerman said the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has underestimated the herd's numbers and condition.

"They've mismanaged that thing so bad that the herd's grown to a population where they have hoof rot, one of the most debilitating diseases an animal can get. What has happened to the elk herd is a travesty and borders on negligence in terms of state supervision," he said.

The herd should be transported out of the city when possible and culled if necessary, Zimmerman said.

Smith said if the elk are moved from the area, "they'll just set up shop in someone else's town."

The city, which provides an online blog to chronicle elk-human encounters, is building the paper trail with comments to the Department of Fish and Wildlife, and is likely to pass the ordinance to stop the feeding of wildlife except for songbirds.

"The elk are state property and that's about all we can do until ODFW comes to us," Smith said. "As it is now, our hands are tied. I'd cull the herd, but not within the city limits at all."



Elk in a Gearhart backyard.

John Dudley

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