

OPINION

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GUEST COLUMN

GEARHART FIREHOUSE BOND

Robbed of our chance to vote

As a result of two people filing a court complaint regarding ballot title language, Gearhart voters have been robbed of our chance to vote on bond financing on this November’s ballot.

The judge found absolutely no merit in any of the issues presented, but as a result of this tactic, the vote has been delayed and costs continue to increase.

Over the years, several locations have been proposed and each effort has been met with a campaign of “alternative facts.” Gearhart citizens need to rely on credible sources, such as the city’s website and blog, instead of social media posts by those seeking to become “influencers” to the detriment of our community and its reputation.



BRENT WARREN

The resources first responders need to keep themselves and our community safe is something only we the voters can decide. We, the voters, chart the course for our community. When these decisions are taken away from us, we’re no longer living in a democracy.

Supporting the Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department is a point of pride among community members. These are the people we depend on to keep us safe, putting their lives at risk for you around the clock, every day. Many have had interactions with our volunteers and are grateful to them for keeping us safe.

Oregon’s coastal communities have been educating their citizens and visitors for years regarding the need to be prepared for a tsunami. Gearhart continues to prepare with Community Emergency Response Team volunteers, supply caches, ShakeOut events, evacuation signage, etc. Another critical component is the community’s ongoing effort to build a fire station engineered to survive earthquakes and located outside of the tsunami zone.

A 5% increase in construction costs would result in an additional \$500,000. Bond interest rates are at an all-time low and the only direction is up. Even a 1/2% interest rate bump would increase costs to taxpayers of more than \$1 million over a 30-year bond term. But these are only financial costs, trivial to any loss of life in our community.

Let’s look at some of the “alternative facts” and counterpoint with truth:

- Initial and continuing education of firefighters is critical. One of the features in our new fire station has consistently been a training room for our volunteers. However, those opposed have changed the language to be “increased space for a regional training program,” implying Gearhart was somehow subsidizing other fire jurisdictions.
- Many volunteer fire departments



Gearhart is looking to build a new firehouse off Highlands Lane.

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have sleeping quarters in their stations. Why? Sleeping facilities allow on-duty emergency medical technicians and firefighters to respond quicker to emergencies. However, those opposed have mischaracterized this feature as evidence that Gearhart is moving away from a volunteer to a full-time paid fire department.

- The memory of a heroic Gearhart volunteer firefighter who gave his life attempting to save a person in the ocean was used to argue against providing training and rescue equipment to our volunteers. However, the truth is we already

have six volunteers undergoing training and certification for water rescue and we already own the equipment.

- A professional construction engineering company provided estimates for building a 13,000-square-foot fire and police station at just over \$10 million, with another \$900,000 for two independent access driveways. All construction projects have “contingency” line items for handling unforeseen costs. While 8% to 10% contingency is typical, ours is 20% and hopefully will not be required. The \$11 million budget plus \$2 million

contingency equals the amount of the bond vote request up to \$13 million. If we are successful in grants and donations, the bond amount could be reduced. However, the opposition mischaracterizes the cost as “upward of \$13 million.”

- It has been suggested the Seaside Fire Department, Medix and the U.S. Coast Guard are sufficient to safeguard our community. Gearhart’s brave and dedicated volunteers are demeaned by statements like this. While we work closely with Seaside and provide mutual aid, the Seaside fire station is also vulnerable to earthquake and tsunami. In a major disaster, it is highly unlikely Seaside would be able to respond. Despite the expertise of our Coast Guard, their limited resources will not be sufficient to cover the Pacific coastline. Medix does not have the training or equipment to safely cut people out of a vehicle accident or deal with hazardous waste.

Please join me in giving thanks and gratitude to Gearhart’s selfless first responders and support the bond funding necessary for Gearhart to keep our community members safe.

Brent Warren serves on the Gearhart City Council.

GUEST COLUMN

Residents will support a modest and sensible project

Gearhart Mayor Paulina Cockrum asks, “A new fire station: If not now, when?”

Let’s answer: We will build a new fire station when the taxpayers who fund this project know their money will be well spent, and not wasted on something that this community does not want, need or understand.

The community likely does want and need a new fire station, as the old one, veteran of a few minor earthquakes, will not withstand a major one. But the community does not want or need an “emergency response and resiliency station” costing citizens upward of \$13 million over the next 20 years, twice the size of the current emergency stations, and the biggest, most opulent and expensive such station per capita in all of Clatsop County.

Among the expanded functions noted on the city website are dormitory rooms and increased space for a regional training program for cadets and interns pursuing a “fire-fighting profession,” new training and equipment for “water rescues” as one example, and space and facilities for “emergency headquarters” including a separate helipad and space for medical, food, water and assembly before and after a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami.

Gearhart residents will support a modest and sensible project proportionate to their needs, that plans for neigh-



JACK ZIMMERMAN

GEARHART IS A SMALL COMMUNITY; SOME YEARS THERE ARE NO FIRES, AND MOST YEARS THERE ARE SCARCE EMERGENCIES WITHIN CITY LIMITS NEEDING ANYTHING MORE THAN AN AMBULANCE RIDE TO SEASIDE. IT IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND HOW CITY HALL CAME TO PROMOTE THIS MASSIVE PROJECT AS NECESSARY.

bors such as Seaside who are ready and willing to assist, and recognizes that the county already boasts a regional emergency training and response headquarters at Camp Rilea, college certifications for a “fire-fighting profession,” and expert water rescue capability by the U.S. Coast Guard.

City Hall seems to have forgotten that the last time a Gearhart firefighter attempted a water rescue, the outcome was the tragic death of hero Robert Chisholm and a firm resolution by surviving members of Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department that water rescues and their legal liability are the sole responsibility of the Coast Guard.

Gearhart is a small community; some years there are no fires, and most years there are scarce emergencies within city limits needing anything more than an ambulance ride to Seaside. It is hard to understand how City Hall came to promote this massive project as necessary for this small community, with many retir-

ees living on small fixed incomes who are already struggling to pay for the water treatment facility and the new school, and who will next be saddled with yet another large project, the construction of a new City Hall, and with long-needed infrastructure repairs that have been deferred for over a decade to focus on this new station project.

Moreover, the proposed Highlands Lane location was already soundly rejected five years ago. The reasons this location was rejected by the citizen fire-house committee, Mayor Matt Brown, city manager, and city councilors, including Cockrum, are still displayed on the city website: “A location on Del Rey Beach Access Road north of Gearhart was not selected because of medical and fire response times, inaccessibility during a tsunami, and proximity to our satellite Hertig Station.”

This proposed location is outside the city limits of Gearhart. It is over 2 miles via U.S. Highway 101 to many homes

within Gearhart, farther than allowed by many home insurance policies, and as far from southern Gearhart as the Seaside fire station. Response times will not be much better than the city’s Hertig Station, which lies directly on the highway and is ready now to serve the Highlands.

Cockrum is concerned that a location in central Gearhart will not be useful after a large tsunami, but fails to note that the Highlands Lane location will not fare any better: it has no chance of assisting anybody needing post-tsunami rescue in central Gearhart. And, at the far northern city boundary east of the creek, it is perhaps the most inconvenient location possible for any western assembly function.

Indeed, Cockrum already voiced these criticisms years ago to promote other locations as safer options. Why has she forgotten them now?

And finally, geotechnical consultants recently determined that a “shallow slope failure” in the dune might occur during an earthquake, making the \$13 million guess highly speculative.

If Cockrum wants to build a new station, then she needs to honestly acknowledge these facts, and work hard to engage the public and independent experts, as partners in a unified discussion of them, within a transparent democratic process.

When and if she does, then the citizens of Gearhart will be ready and willing to build a new fire station.

Jack Zimmerman is a Gearhart resident. He filed a legal complaint challenging the ballot title for a firehouse bond measure.