

LIFESTYLES

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SMALL TOWN
BIG JOB

From pipes to parks to roads, one man tasked with keeping Ione operating

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East Oregonian

For all intents and purposes, Curtis Thompson is Ione's water department.

He's also the streets department on most days. And the parks department as well.

Although his official title is "maintenance supervisor," Thompson spends most of the time supervising himself.

As Ione's only full-time employee, Thompson is a one-man department in charge of public works and maintenance for the town of 329 people.

On an idyllic Wednesday morning Thompson was doing some routine maintenance of the city's water system with Stewart Syverson, a local man who's helping out for a few weeks until he resumes his job as a firefighter for the Oregon Department of Forestry.

With the Ione's Fourth of July celebration the biggest event of the year, June is a busy month for Thompson and whatever extra help the city can afford.

In addition to usual tasks like cleaning the parks and mowing the lawn at Ione City Park, Thompson plans to clean the streets and paint the crosswalks.

But maintaining the city's water system is a year-round job.

The money generated through Ione's 180 water accounts comprises 90 percent of the city's revenue. That's especially important to a city with a total budget of a little more than \$500,000.

"(Water) is the only thing that's a money generator," longtime Ione Mayor Linda LaRue said.

As he checked water meters, a booster station and the city's only operational well, Thompson looked like a seasoned professional.

But when he started the job five years ago, Thompson had no experience working with water systems let alone running one.

Before accepting the maintenance supervisor position, the lifelong Ione resident was a mechanic by trade, working out-of-town jobs at place like Hermiston Foods and Mid Columbia Bus Co.

Due to a three-month gap between employees and neglect in some areas, Thompson arrived to a job in disarray — the city park bathrooms were a mess, a winter freeze had depleted the city's reservoir and there was only one functional vehicle in the city's fleet.

Thompson described this period as "one step forward, 15 steps back."

For instance, Thompson would try to mow the lawn at the park, but the lawnmower wouldn't work. When he tried to fix the lawnmower, he would discover that there weren't any tools to fix it with.

Trying to learn how to operate a water system on the fly was also a challenge.

It took Thompson a week to check all of the city's meters for the first time, a task that now takes him five hours.

Thompson was also petrified of digging up the street to fix leaky water pipes.

"You get a problem, and you (suddenly) got water squirting out of the ground," he said.

But as time went on, Thompson's water expertise improved.

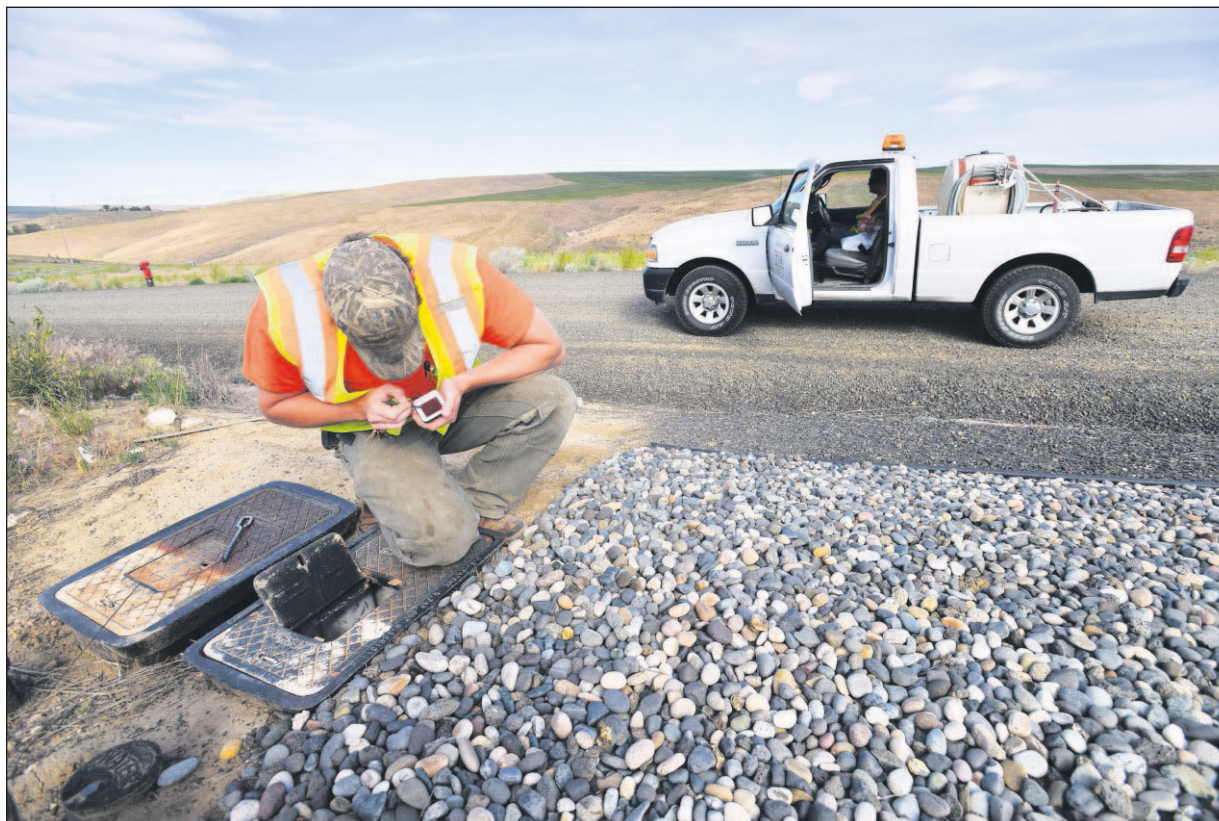
Thompson said the city already has a good water infrastructure in place, using a combination of grants and a U.S. Department of Agriculture loan to fund a \$1 million project to improve the city's water system in 2000.

Thompson also tasked himself with complying with a state law that requires 10 percent of a city's water meters to be replaced every year to ensure proper readings. When he started replacing meters, he realized some of them hadn't been replaced since the 1960s.

Under Thompson's watch, other aspects of the city have improved — the park's grass is now green and trim, the city fleet is stored under a garage Thompson helped build and the roads and sidewalks in downtown Ione were recently repaved. The 30-year-old is now married with kids and enjoys being one of the few residents who works in town.



Ione maintenance supervisor Curtis Thompson uses a wrench to tighten a new coupling to a waterline while installing a new stand-pipe Wednesday at the Morrow County Grain Growers store in Ione.



Curtis Thompson checks water meters on Delbert Drive on Wednesday in Ione.

That's not to say the job still doesn't have its challenges.

Last November, Thompson had to deal with Ione City Hall's plugged-up septic system, a leaky water pipe under Main Street and a reliable seasonal worker suffering a heart attack, forcing his retirement from the job.

Thompson said he'd like more help, but the city budget won't allow it.

The city's entire workforce is comprised of Thompson and City Recorder Kim Carter, who works 30 hours a week. As a volunteer mayor, LaRue handles more complex jobs like looking at land use requirements and flood plain management.

While LaRue can ably fill in for Carter if she takes time off work, LaRue said Ione has a deal with Heppner to temporarily take over maintenance duties if Thompson is out for an extended period of time.

Thompson has stabilized a position that had been a revolving door for over a decade. He said he's been the longest tenured maintenance supervisor since 1994, with most workers in between only lasting a year or two

before moving on.

LaRue said previous maintenance workers left because they received too much input from the city council and citizens, a trend the current city council has taken efforts to reverse.

Thompson said he isn't bothered too much while he's on the job, although he did recall a time a resident tried to have him retrieve a kite from a power line on a Sunday night.

As the morning wears on, Thompson continues work on a long-term project to install a new pipe by the Morrow County Grain Growers building. The project promises to be lucrative for the city — the growers are compensating the city for the project and the increased water usage from the repaired pipe will also flow into city coffers.

LaRue said she and the rest of the city have been happy with Thompson's work.

According to the mayor, Thompson might be the last person he needs to please.

"He's his own worst critic, if he has a critic (at all)," she said.

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Curtis Thompson and Stewart Syverson, a temporary assistant to Thompson, lift a double check valve into a front-end loader at the Ione City Maintenance shop on Wednesday in Ione.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Curtis Thompson checks reservoir levels at the city's main well on Wednesday in Ione.

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