

ROADS: Baker City has a permanent property tax levy

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need to ask for more taxes.” Although the city does receive almost \$1.2 million from the state and federal governments for road preservation, \$748,380 is spent on “materials and services.”

While some line items under materials and services are obvious — \$40,000 for street supplies, \$79,800 for equipment rental — others seem out of place.

For instance, the state tax street fund pays for \$195,000 to power the city’s street lights. The city council briefly considered paying for those costs with a \$2 utility fee but ultimately decided against it in the short term.

Public Works Director Bob Patterson said the line item that causes the “biggest heartburn” is the \$221,330 the street fund spends on “central services charges,” which are the charges levied by other department for the services they do for streets, like engineering and accounting.

It can work the other way too — the sewer department transfers in money to the street fund to help cover the costs of utility workers, who work for both departments.

While it may seem counterintuitive for the city to charge itself for services, Patterson said the practice is necessary to demonstrate to the state that the city is balancing its budget.

Ultimately, all of the materials, services and employee costs leave Pend-

leton with an average of \$300,000 a year, although the city is spending \$1 million this year as a part of a strategy to use savings from previous budgets to spend on larger street projects every three years.

With the general fund already stretched to its limits, city officials maintain that new sources of revenue will be the only way to fix streets.

Many cities already have alternative revenue streams, and those who don’t always have to keep it for consideration.

Here’s how two other major Eastern Oregon cities spend their street money.

Hermiston

Thanks to strong population growth over the past several decades, a lot of infrastructure in Hermiston is relatively new.

While the shrinking funds from the state gas tax means Hermiston is also facing deferred maintenance with its streets, although Hermiston’s \$1 million backlog is a pittance compared to Pendleton’s \$16 million.

Hermiston’s state gas tax money goes into a \$446,875 street maintenance fund, a portion of which covers lighter maintenance in crack seals, as well as the \$340,000 street construction fund, which is sometimes used for larger overlay projects.

Although the city has occasionally had to transfer money from other funds to

cover street maintenance, Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said it relies solely on the state gas tax for maintenance revenue.

Because Hermiston doesn’t maintain an in-house engineering department, Morgan said a significant amount of money is spent contracting with engineering firm Anderson Perry & Associates.

Hermiston doesn’t have a public works director either, meaning either Morgan or City Manager Byron Smith act as the de facto director for street projects.

Besides the relative newness of it much of Hermiston’s infrastructure, Morgan attributed the success the city has had in maintaining its street system to the foresight of former city manager Ed Brookshier, who didn’t take on too many troubled roads.

There are no immediate plans to find an additional revenue for streets, but Morgan said that unless the state finds an alternative method for street funding that reverses years of shrinking revenue, Hermiston can’t take any options off the table in the long term.

Baker City

While Pendleton’s property tax revenue doesn’t wholly cover the cost of public safety, Baker City has made street funding a permanent part of the property tax rate.

In addition to the money Baker City receives from the state gas tax, it has also earmarked 12.75 percent of property tax revenue for street maintenance.

Baker City Public Works Director Michelle Owen said city voters continually approved 5-year property tax levies for street repair, but changed it to a permanent tax rate roughly equal to the revenue generated from the levy in the late 1990s after Measure 5 passed.

Owen said the property tax revenue has helped shield the city from the diminishing returns from the state gas tax, although its still affected the city’s street systems. In 2014, 50 percent of the roads were rated “good” by Baker City staff, down from 73 percent in 2005.

Each year, the Baker City Council approves a street pavement management plan, which equated to \$455,601 for maintenance this year.

Owen said this year’s funds only covered chip seals and fog seals this year, although they tackle larger projects every few years.

Baker City doesn’t have a dedicated streets department, so when street repairs need to be made, all 25 public works employees are expected to chip in.

While Baker City’s population has grown modestly over the past three decades, Owen said the city has been lucky to have avoided sprawl, which could have added additional costs to the city.

EOTEC: Event center on schedule for March 2016

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“ex-officio” position could be created.

Brookshier assured them that no longer being a member of the board would in no way lessen his commitment to the project. He would continue to attend meetings and was available to help see issues like the water rights negotiations through to the end.

“I am absolutely willing to help any way I can,” he said.

During the public comment section of the meeting, former board member Dennis Doherty said he was disappointed Brookshier was going to step down and said it was worth asking the city and county more about what they wanted out of the project so that “they can take some ownership.”

He said he thought the board was doing the right thing by taking the time to do more fundraising and he didn’t think they should be criticized for that.

George Anderson said that the intergovernmental agreement he drafted for the city and county to form the EOTEC board listed December 2016 as the end of the lease with the school district. He characterized the board’s later decision to shoot for hosting the August 2016 fair and rodeo and publicize that date as something the board was trying for, but said December 2016 was the real deadline.

“When people are saying ‘Oh my goodness it’s not on schedule!’ It’s exactly on schedule,” he said.

Puzey said he was also disappointed in the “naivete in the commentary” about EOTEC’s decision to not move the fair and rodeo until 2017.

“One thing I find frustrating is optimism has been interpreted as deception,” he said.

The meeting also included a brief update from business manager Heather Cannell and project manager Gary Winsand of Frew Development.

Cannell said the new design for www.eotechermiston.com was complete and the website was once again functional. She said she was working on making arrangements for flooring, paint, furniture, kitchen appliances, electrical outlets and audio-visual technology for the exhibitor and event center.

Winsand said the center, which is currently under construction by G2 Construction, is on schedule to be completed in March 2016. He said design work on the barns is underway and design for the rodeo arena is expected to be finished in February 2016. The arena will take seven to eight months to build, Winsand said, necessitating a “very aggressive” schedule once the design is complete.

Brookshier said the EOTEC board should have the additional \$2.2 million it is seeking by then.

The city of Hermiston has already given \$600,000 and the EOTEC board plans to approach the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners for the same amount. According to what board members told the city on Monday, local hoteliers have offered to raise their \$1 per room per night Tourism Promotion Assessment to \$2 per night and use the extra revenue to incrementally pay off a \$1 million municipal bond at a rate of about \$100,000 a year.

“We’ve had a tremendous amount of help from the outside and it’s time we step up and do this right,” Brookshier said.

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STUDENTS: Milton-Freewater had best total rate at 11 percent

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Umatilla Indian Reservation. The absenteeism likely stems from a variety of factors, she said, including the fact the reservation is out of town so the buses arrive earlier to pick students up. She said the district is trying to come up with solutions by meeting with parents.

“It’s a partnership between the school, the kids, the parents and the community,” she said. “We need to have those kids in seats so we can teach them.”

Pendleton High School administrators “tend to be relentless” about promoting senior attendance by identifying issues early, having conversations about graduation and offering incentives, said Mooney.

Hermiston has also been focusing on positive reinforcement. The district’s total chronic absentee rate, 17 percent, is better than the state average. But more than 2 of every 5 Hermiston high school seniors missed at least 10 percent of their classes. Superintendent Fred Maiocco said he would like to see improvements.

“That’s (higher) than what we would like to see, and so we’re putting a renewed emphasis on attendance and trying to encourage ... students to be in attendance as much as possible with lots of different incentives, awards and recognitions at our schools,” he said. “From the first quarter, it appears those initiatives are having some success, and we’re seeing some improvements,

but again we’re anxious to see that through the entire year.”

Although Stanfield had one of the better overall absentee rates — 16 percent — more than half of the seniors were chronically absent. Stanfield Secondary School Principal Bryan Johnson said as the seniors turn 18 and complete their graduation requirements, they often become unmotivated, or develop “senioritis,” especially if they can complete some of their coursework online.

To help motivate students, Johnson said the school has been rewarding positive attendance this year and has also changed its honors diploma requirements to include at least 90 percent attendance.

“It’s definitely an area of focus,” he said. “That was our goal at the start of the year. We’ve really monitored those attendance issues, and trying to enforce our attendance policies more this year.”

Umatilla implemented a new truancy program last year, Superintendent Heidi

Sipe said. Administrators schedule meetings with chronically absent students, she said, and if the parents do not attend, the district performs home visits to develop solutions to improve attendance. If the truancy continues, Sipe said the matter is referred to Umatilla Police Department, and families can face fines.

Sipe said the program was beneficial last year and should have an even larger impact this year. She also said the district has seen a strong correlation between attendance rates and student grades.

“It’s really exciting to see progress being made,” she said. “The first year was a learning year for us, and after this second year, we really hope we see some improved student performance.”

According to the recent report, 21 percent of Umatilla’s total student population was chronically absent last school year, as were 35 percent of high school seniors.

Morrow County School District had one of the highest regional absentee rates for

the total population at 22 percent, including 39 percent of high school seniors.

Milton-Freewater had one of the best total rates in the region at 11 percent, including the low senior rate of 14 percent. District officials were unavailable for comment before press time.

Contact Sean Hart at smhart@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4534.

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