

ROUNDBABOUTS: ODOT has final say on projects

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for any projects not included in the plan, however, so he said it was important to include all projects that the city might be interested in pursuing.

Spencer said the amendment process began after conversations with a “large retailer” interested in developing a portion of Highway 395 between Hermiston Foods and the Wal-Mart Distribution Center. Planning commission documents in the agenda packet identify that retailer as farm supply and sporting goods store Ranch & Home.

He said the retailer had begun the application process with the city to build a

100,000 square foot store and develop several “lease pads” that could end up hosting restaurants, gas stations or other small retailers. Spencer said without a traffic signal being installed at what is currently known as the “Hermiston Foods driveway” traffic would be limited to a right turn in and right turn out, discouraging visitors to the stores.

“The store itself could function without a traffic signal, but you would need one with the lease pads,” Spencer said.

City councilors agreed that a traffic signal at the development’s entrance — as well as previously-proposed ones at places like Airport Road and the Wal-Mart

Distribution Center — were likely necessary but they needed to be stop lights, not roundabouts.

“It definitely slows traffic way down,” councilor Rod Hardin said.

Spencer said merely adding the possibility of roundabouts to the Transportation System Plan didn’t mean they had to go in. But he acknowledged that ODOT has the final say on highway projects, meaning putting them in the plan as an option would “leave the door open.”

Councilor Doug Smith said he didn’t like putting up roadblocks for potential developers, and the longer the city took to approve the amendment allowing for a signal to be placed at the

Hermiston Foods driveway the longer the developer would not have certainty moving forward.

However, councilor Doug Primmer said he didn’t think waiting a couple of weeks would really make much of a difference, and in the end councilors voted unanimously to continue the public hearing on the matter until their March 14 meeting, allowing staff to discuss with ODOT whether the state transportation commission would still sign off on the Transportation System Plan without adding the recommendation for roundabouts.

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HOMELESS: Camp is now very visible from the road

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to replace his social security card, which had been in the wallet. The process took months. His new ID shows his address as “Under I-82 overpass, Old River Road, Umatilla.”

“I just got those replaced, so now I’m looking again,” he said. “Right now, I’m just unemployed, waiting for the factories to pick up, which is next month.”

Most of the campers were moved from their campsites in Umatilla in August when the city passed a ban on long-term camping within city limits. The campers moved to a spot further upriver, but had to move again this month because of rising waters.

When the move order first came down, Douglas moved his items then helped others. He found a spot in the trees next to a collapsed tent and moved in. He left the tent and its collection of clothing and items untouched.

“I figured it was none of my business,” he said. “How would I feel if I took that over and then the owner came back? I’m not a thief.”

The current residents of the Umatilla camp each repeat the same refrain: we’re not thieves, we’re not criminals, we’re not bad people. We don’t steal anything from anyone.

For James Johnson, life snowballed, tragedy following tragedy — his father died, he lost his job, his wife left him, he was arrested. Now on probation, Johnson said he did not want to be a burden on his mother and took to life in the camp.

“I was taught survival when I was a kid by my dad, and I’ve been camping most of my life,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of pride. I don’t want to live off anyone.”

Johnson has been homeless for about two years. In addition to working side jobs and searching for full-time employment, Johnson is the camp’s designated firewood cutter, helping those without the benefit of survival training survive in the camps. Most of the campers use fires to cook meals, and some take the embers into their tents to keep warm but must watch for carbon monoxide poisoning. When they can afford them, the campers hook Coleman stoves to propane tanks to cook meals and heat their tents at the same time.

The campers have little, but all say they share food, sleeping bags and firewood with others who stop by.

“Anyone who needs a place to stay or a meal, people send them to us. We can’t help much, but we try,” said Laurie Love, one of the newest members of the camp.

Homeless for about six months, Love is one of the newest members of the camp. After losing her home due to divorce, Love found herself on



The homeless camp on Umatilla River Road was down at this spot on the banks of the Umatilla River before rising water levels forced the campers to move up closer to the road.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

“No one wants to have a town with homeless people in it, but most of the people here didn’t do anything wrong. Something bad happened, and it happened fast.”

— Laurie Love, one of the newest members of the camp

the streets. She said she has an RV, in storage, but has been turned down by RV parks because she is now homeless and has a record for being unable to pay fines.

“I never dreamed I would end up here,” Love said. “I used to be very judgmental, but sometimes God wants to put you on the other side of the tracks. I’ve learned a lot, and I’ll never forget it. It can happen to anyone.”

Love points out people treat her differently when they find out she is a “river person” now. Some people close off or assume she is a criminal; other people offer help or food or clothing.

“People think all the worst things, that we’re thieves, liars, vagrants, but this community also has really awesome people,” she said. “No, no one wants to have a town with homeless people in it, but most of the people here didn’t do anything wrong. Something bad happened, and it happened fast.”

The most recent move has been difficult on some in the group, because the camp is now very visible from the road.

“I’m beginning to wonder if they’re using us to clean up the river. We move to a site, we get it cleaned up, we haul off the trash that’s been there for years — then they tell us to move,” she said. “Now, here we are by the road, and it’s embarrassing.”

Umatilla City Manager Bob Ward said the city council will discuss finding a set space for campers to stay where they can meet hygiene needs and have

access to law enforcement.

“We have been getting a lot of complaints here from people about the presence of the tent camp,” he said. “It’s not really growing, it’s that as the river waters rise, the people who have been camping are moving to higher ground. At this point, all of the calls we have received have been complaints and not necessarily suggestions.”

The council may discuss the campers and homeless situation at its next meeting. Meanwhile, Umatilla County is working on a solution to move the camps off the roadside.

“We have been working collaboratively with out code enforcement, planning, and board of commissioners to put together a plan to deal with things out there,” Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan said. “It is still in its infancy, but I do foresee a plan in the near future.”

That plan will likely involve identifying everyone in the camps, arresting anyone with warrants and posting signs for no overnight camping or parking in the area, Rowan said. The campers continue to work on finding food and shelter while trying to get back on their feet.

“We don’t plan to live here forever. Going to college, you live in a dorm before you graduate. Until we get another job, this is where we are,” Love said. “Just because someone doesn’t have anyone to turn to doesn’t make them a bad person. It doesn’t make them a loser. It makes it hard.”

JAIL: Should not have much effect on staffing

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about \$120,000 a year, and he and his jail commander, Capt. Stewart Harp, plan to meet with Rogers to figure out some details. Rowan said they could have a contract by early March.

Rogers and Rowan are both seeking re-election this year. Rogers said the decision to move had been up in the air for two years, but once the talk got serious it took about six months for Rogers to finalize the decision. Another three months passed by before it could be implemented to give Union County notice of the switch.

Rogers said while he gives notice to other county departments, such as commissioners, the judges and district attorneys of important decisions such as this, the jail is his, and the decision was his alone to make.

He added while it may seem like the additional distance would cost more money, this is not the case.

“I think it’ll be a wash in the long run. It’s a little more expensive to transport the prisoners, but the cost

per prisoner per day is cheaper,” Rogers said. “It’ll work out pretty close.”

Rowan said the Umatilla County Jail can handle the few inmates Wallowa County will send without much of an effect on staffing. And the new revenue stream will have to cover the cost of housing inmates, he said, but this also could mean more programs and services to help offenders stay out of jail.

“We look at all this as an opportunity to improve,” Rowan said.

Of course, commissioners of both counties will have the final approval of the contract.

The jail already has contracts with Morrow County, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservations, the county’s parole and probation department and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Phil Wright of the East Oregonian and Steve Tool of the Wallowa County Chieftain contributed to this report.

YOUNGMAN: Said she found DeGeneres to be quite genuine

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Grishong, and sister, Rebecca Barlow, joined them there.

Later from her seat in the audience, Youngman laughed at Duchovny and DeGeneres’ banter. During commercial breaks, staff members kept the audience in a high-energy frenzy with dance contests and pulsing music. Though she had worried about having enough stamina for the trip, Youngman just relaxed and enjoyed the adventure.

“She was so high and energetic. Her adrenaline was flowing,” Grishong said. “She had accomplished one of her dreams and she was in the clouds.”

“It was amazing,” Youngman said. “It surpassed my expectations.”

After the show, the producers treated the five women to dinner at an expensive Italian restaurant.

Youngman said she found DeGeneres to be quite genuine.

“She means what she says and she truly cares about other people,” the teacher said. “The people who work for her promote her values.”

That’s important to Youngman. She is using her third battle with cancer as a platform to promote her own values and the importance of being kind.

The day the show aired, Youngman had returned to reality with a crash. She spent the morning in chemotherapy. It was a lot of downtime to think about her surreal adventure in LA and all the folks who had made it happen. The businesses that held fundraisers for her medical fund. The students and their plethora of tweets.

After watching the show again at home, she expressed her gratitude.

“I’m so thankful to all the people who supported and encouraged me — the high school students and the community and the campaign that allowed me to go down there and spread the message of kindness.”

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ENERGY: The bill might still undergo changes

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Beyer said the amendment strengthened the role of the Public Utility Commission, in response to criticism the earlier version would have weakened commission oversight.

Utilities objected to a provision in the amendment that would lower the annual cost cap for the renewable energy mandate from 4 percent to 3 percent. The existing renewable energy mandate allows utilities to ask the Public Utility Commission to approve rate increases based on costs incurred to meet the law.

“I’m not sure why changing it advances the policy now,” said Scott Bolton, a vice president at PacifiCorp.

Ry Schwark, a spokesman for PacifiCorp, said he expected the bill might still undergo changes. “Since this now will likely need to go to conference, much will depend upon what comes out the other end of that process,” Schwark wrote in an email.

Beyer’s amendment also expanded the types of energy

the utilities could use to meet the renewables mandate to include certain hydropower projects, biomass and power plants that burn municipal solid waste. That provision did not appear to be controversial.

Beyer was also trying to shore up support for the bill after news reports last week that Gov. Kate Brown’s administration silenced state energy regulators who critiqued the bill, and that those regulators had not received enough information from the utilities to vet cost projections for the bill.

“There was lots of concerns expressed in the press and everybody else about how this bill got here and what it did and whether the regulator was left out or not,” Beyer said on Monday.

House Bill 4036 would double Oregon’s existing mandate to increase renewable energy and require Portland General Electric and PacifiCorp to use renewable power sources such as wind and solar to serve at least 50 percent of their customers’ energy demand in Oregon by 2040, up from the current state mandate of 25 percent

renewable energy by 2025.

The bill would also require the investor-owned utilities to stop using coal to serve Oregon customers, but there are questions about whether the bill would actually do much to impact the phase-out of coal power in Oregon. Portland General Electric has already committed to close Oregon’s only coal plant, in Boardman, by 2020, and Beyer said the bill would have a greater impact on the types of power utilities use to replace coal.

Beyer invited Susan Ackerman, chair of the Public Utility Commission, to testify before the committee on Monday, something Senate Republi-

cans had called for last week.

Ackerman said the Public Utility Commission had long considered a carbon cap-and-trade system to be the most efficient way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Lawmakers introduced a bill to create a cap-and-trade system this session, although it seems to have lost momentum and is currently assigned to the budget writing Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

Ackerman said she was concerned that if the renewable mandate bill passes, it could use up the political capital that would be necessary to pass cap-and-trade legislation.

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