

IRRIGON

City compromises on water bill overage fees

Some complain new rate is outrageous

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
East Oregonian

After years of taking out loans and neglecting build reserve funds, the city of Irrigon finds itself in a difficult position.

On the one hand, city officials know they have a water budget that is sliding dangerously close to red ink. On the other hand, residents argue they need to maintain affordable services to make their community a better place to live.

The issue came to a head Thursday over new water rates that went into effect July 1, which included a substantial increase in overage charges for homes that use more than 10,000 gallons. Some residents said they were alarmed to see their combined sewer and water bills as high as \$300-\$500 for the month.

In response, the Irrigon City Council held a special meeting where members voted to slightly lower the overage payments, and requested a formal rate study moving forward. Councilor Michelle Hagen said it's a compromise that will provide enough in the short term until the city can find a long-term balance.

"We can't scrape by. We can't go backwards," Hagen said. "We have to get ahead of ourselves."

City Manager Aaron Palmquist, who was hired in 2013, traced the root of the problem back over a decade, when he said it became apparent the city would need to update its water infrastructure but had no reserves to help cover the cost.

Instead, Irrigon took out loans for a number of projects, including two new groundwater wells that were drilled in 2008. High levels of nitrates were found in the city's old well that Palmquist said posed a public health risk. That's no surprise,



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Long-time Irrigon resident Kieron Haney used 120,000 gallons of water last month keeping his yard green. An amount that cost him roughly \$500 on his monthly bill.

considering the city is located within the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area, or LUBGWMA, established in 1990 due to nitrate levels that exceeded federal safe drinking water standards.

It's the city, Palmquist said, that has been left to pay the piper. Today, Irrigon is saddled with eight bonds on sewer and water projects, with approximately one-third of bill payments going toward paying back those loans.

"We've just been borrowing (money)," Palmquist said. "It's not been effective, long-range."

In February 2014, the city hired a certified public accountant to



Haney

review its financial health. What the audit discovered was that the water budget would run a deficit within five years, unless some adjustments were made.

"If we don't turn our ship around, we're getting sunk," Palmquist said.

As of July, Irrigon residents were paying a base rate of \$23.63 for water and \$15.32 toward water bonds. Sewer rates ran another \$46.17 and \$14.88 for bonds, totaling a minimum payment of \$100 per month. In addition, the city charges roughly 2.5 cents for every cubic foot of water used over 10,000 gallons.

The overage is what caught Kieron Haney by surprise when he opened his latest bill, which ran just

shy of \$500.

"Does that sound reasonable to anybody here?" Haney asked at Thursday's city council meeting.

Haney, 58, has lived in Irrigon since 1972 and built his home on Northeast Main Avenue in 1980. He worked 35 years at Union Pacific's Hinkle Yard in Hermiston before injuries and heart surgery forced him to retire.

Haney readily admits he uses a lot of water — he used more than 120,000 gallons last month, according to his bill — but he said that's what it takes to keep his 15,000-square-foot yard looking nice during the hot summers. He's already removed a chunk of grass and extended his gravel driveway to cut back on costs, but the bill keeps going up.

PENDLETON Boutique Air makes bid to replace SeaPort

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

The Pendleton City Council could choose the city's next commercial air service at a meeting Tuesday, but they won't have an official recommendation until moments before they meet.

The Pendleton Airport Commission is holding a special meeting an hour before the council's start time with the intent of providing a recommendation on whether to stick with SeaPort Airlines of Portland or switch to Boutique Air of San Francisco.

The commission heard bid presentations from both companies Wednesday.

Afterwards, the commission directed airport manager Steve Chrisman to verify Boutique's quality of service with the other airports it serves and return to the commission with a report so that the commission

could make a recommendation to the council.

Boutique advertised itself as an airline that could boost boardings by offering reliability, good customer service and faster, more comfortable planes.

Boutique is offering a \$2.27 million package for 21 weekly round-trip flights from Pendleton to Portland and a \$2.25 million option for the same number of trips to Seattle.

Depending on the package, the city can exchange one of the flights for a round trip to Portland, Seattle or Boise, Idaho.

The estimated average fare is \$99. After declaring bankruptcy earlier this year, SeaPort told the commission the company was honing its focus on Pendleton and the Northwest.

SeaPort staff said their airline would offer cheaper flights, more connectivity through its partnership

with Alaska Airlines and a larger advertising budget.

The airline also presented two packages — 21 round trips to Portland for \$1.97 million and another option that includes 16 trips to Portland and five to Seattle. SeaPort estimates it will charge \$49-\$109 per ticket for Portland flights.

Pendleton pays for commercial services through the U.S. Department of Transportation Essential Air Service program, which provides a subsidy to cover the cost. It is the only community in the Northwest with an EAS subsidy.

The airport commission will meet Tuesday at 6 p.m. at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport, 2016 Airport Road and the council will meet Tuesday at 7 p.m. at the council chambers in city hall, 500 S.W. Dorion Ave.

Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.

Crews get Gibbon Fire 40 percent contained

East Oregonian

Firefighters continue to make progress on the Gibbon Fire east of Pendleton, burning in remote terrain near Meacham Creek and Stumbough Ridge.

The lightning-sparked blaze is now 40 percent contained. Crews began demobilizing Friday, and management of the fire will transition to a local team staffed by the Oregon Department of Forestry and Umatilla National Forest.

Though the size of the fire has increased to 316 acres, that's due primarily to controlled burns meant to bring the fire up to containment lines. No structures have been threatened. A 10-person hand crew and one engine will remain on scene for the next several days.

In other fire updates:

• Rail Fire — Located five miles west of Unity in Baker County, the Rail Fire has grown to 12,196 acres. It is 10 percent contained. Burnout operations began Thursday in

strategic areas on the northeast and southeast portions of the fire, in order to draw the blaze to established fire lines. There are 667 people, 21 crews, 10 dozers, 21 engines, 19 water tenders and 8 helicopters are assigned to the fire.

• Juntura Complex — Made up of three fires burning between Vale and Burns. All together, they have scorched a total of 24,301 acres, and are now largely contained. Management will shift back to local teams manned by the Bureau of Land Management's Vale District on Saturday.

The public is reminded there are public use restrictions in effect on the Umatilla National Forest, and regulated use closures on the ODF Northeast Oregon District. These regulations place limits on things like chainsaws, smoking, off-road travel and campfires, and are meant to lower the risk of human-caused wildfires. For more information, visit the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center website at www.bmidc.org.

Candidate slated for meet-and-greet

PENDLETON — James Crary, a candidate for U.S. representative for Oregon's 2nd Congressional District, will meet community members Monday at 9 a.m. at Buckin' Bean Coffee Roasters, 405 N.W. Despain Ave.

Pendleton City Council considers crack seal bid

PENDLETON — After a little bit of fiddling, the Pendleton City Council is ready to consider a bid to seal cracks on about 64 streets.

According to a staff report, the lowest bid for crack seal services came from Kerry Fuller Enterprises of Bend at \$216,149.

Staff put out a request for bids earlier in the summer for crack and slurry

seals, but only received one bid at cost they deemed exorbitant.

After asking around, city employees learned that many slurry seal contractors were already booked for the summer, which explained the lack of bids.

In an interview, Public Works Director Bob Patterson said a crack seal fills in cracks in the road while a slurry seal is a thin layer of asphalt used to "refresh" the quality of the street.

City staff dropped slurry seal work from their request and sent the job back out to bid, attracting three bidders this time.

Removing the slurry seal work means the city can address some of the crack seals staff had slated for next year.

The report states that most of the crack seals will be applied to streets in good condition, which will stave off deterioration and more expensive repairs.

BRIEFLY

Combined with other street projects, the city is projected to spend \$806,000 on roads this year, coming in under the \$850,000 maximum budget.

Briefs are compiled from staff and wire reports, and press releases. Email press releases to news@eastoregonian.com



"Country Scenes & Children's Dreams"
August 17-21, 2016



FAIR: www.morrowcountyoregon.com/fair RODEO: www.morrowcountyoregon.com/fair/rodeo

Wednesday, Aug. 17th
Dr. Solar Magic Show
Kid Fun Zone



4-H Food Contest
4-H/FFA Small Animal Showmanship
Watermelon Contest
Pet Show for the Public
4-H Fashion Show
RDO Tractor Pull

Thursday, Aug. 18th
Dr. Solar Magic Show
Kid Fun Zone

Old Time Fiddlers
Ice Cream Social
Talent Show
FFA Floral Design
Murray's Wine Tasting
Featuring:
Joe Lindsay
Nate Bosford



OTPR NPRA SLACK

Friday, Aug. 19th
Dr. Solar Magic Show



Kid Fun Zone
OMSI
4-H/FFA Showmanship
Master Showmanship
OTPR/NPRA Rodeo
After Rodeo Band:
Jessie Leigh

Saturday, Aug. 20th
Dr. Solar Magic Show
Kid Fun Zone

Parade
FFA Awards
Buyers Luncheon
Livestock Auction
OTPR/NPRA Rodeo
After Rodeo Band:
Jessie Leigh



Sunday, Aug. 21st
All Exhibits Released
Morrow County Rodeo

Welcome

Alder Family Dental is pleased to announce Dr. Nathan Bushman will be joining the practice. Dr. Bushman specializes in general dentistry for patients of all ages. We will continue to provide the same great dental care. New patients and same day emergencies are always welcome!



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