

Oregon water rights fee wins approval

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Bureau

SALEM — A proposal to impose a new annual fee on all water rights in Oregon has passed a key legislative committee but the amount is no longer specified.

House Bill 2706 originally sought a \$100 yearly fee for every water right, capped at \$1,000 for individual irrigators and \$2,500 for municipal governments.

The bill is intended to pay for water management conducted by the Oregon Water Resources Department, but opponents say it unfairly targets irrigators who are already under financial strain.

Rep. Ken Helm, D-Bea-

verton, proposed an amendment stripping the specific amounts from HB 2706 to “lower the heat” on the bill and demonstrate that a fee amount is not “pre-ordained,” he said.

The House Energy and Environment Committee approved the amended bill 5-4 during an April 17 work session, referring it to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means, which isn’t subject to normal legislative deadlines.

Helm said he’s overseeing a work group that’s discussing a companion bill, House Bill 2705, which requires irrigators to install measuring devices to gauge water use and was previously referred to the House Rules Committee.

During those negotiations,

the water rights fee has “diminished in popularity and significance” but may still provide a useful funding source, he said.

Rep. David Brock Smith, R-Port Orford, said he wouldn’t support the amended version of HB 2706 because leaving the fee amount blank “scares me more.”

The only fee amount acceptable to irrigators in the Klamath basin is zero, said Rep. Werner Reschke, R-Klamath Falls, who likewise opposed the bill.

Finding a new source of funding for water management is a good idea, but the burden shouldn’t fall disproportionately on irrigators, said Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario.

BUDGET: Next budget cycle begins July 1

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process along,” said Speaker of the House Tina Kotek, D-Portland. She also said it was intended to “educate” the public and the legislative assembly about the choices lawmakers will have to make in order to eliminate the shortfall.

“It’s definitely a wake-up call,” Kotek said. “If you look at those reduction lists, Oregonians are going to see things that they care about on those lists. And without new revenue, we don’t have a lot of options.”

Kotek said that conversations about a tax on health care providers were “ongoing,” but that the list of cuts released Monday does not include that or any other new revenue proposals. A group of legislators from both parties and chambers is meeting privately to hash out a possible consensus on business taxes.

Senate Minority Leader Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day, claimed in a statement that Democrats were presenting a “false choice of either accepting unconscionable cuts...or raising taxes.”

In November, voters rejected a proposed gross sales receipts tax on certain corporations, Ballot Measure 97, which was projected to raise \$6 billion in new revenue for the state’s upcoming two-year budget. In its wake, some of its opponents have called for addressing the costs of the state’s public employee pension system and other long-term cost drivers first.

Kotek said that the list of possible reductions did not address Oregon’s budget in the longer term — merely the two years of the next budget cycle, which begins July 1.

SCHOOL: After-school program began in 2003

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In the first installment of the class “Laboratory 101,” a group of middle schoolers are peering over beakers filled with colored liquid.

“We’re making a rainbow in a jar,” said Gerardo Cruz, a sixth grader. “When we’re done, there’ll be different colors at different levels.”

Cruz and his classmates will get to do a lot of hands-on science activities this term. They’re looking forward to using the science they learn to create a volcano and construct a lava lamp.

The class is taught by Fernanda Hernandez and Madison Finck, juniors at Umatilla High School.

“At the end of the session we hope they learn about how different chemicals react, and how fun science can be,” Finck said.

On the first day, Hernandez and Finck introduce the students to some basic science concepts and then put them to work. Mixing different amounts of corn syrup into colored liquid gives each color a different density. When the colors are carefully mixed together and allowed to settle, it creates a “rainbow in a jar.”

“You have to be gentle,” Cruz said, using an eye dropper to measure corn syrup into a jar.

The after-school program has been in Umatilla since about 2003, and plays to students’ interests. If a student is eager to see a certain program or class that isn’t offered, students are encouraged to start their own.

“That’s how most programs and ideas start — from kids,” Sipe said.

The program is held after school Monday through Thursday for two and a half hours. It encompasses



Staff photo by Jayati Ramakrishnan

Morgan Finck, a UHS junior, helps some sixth grade students on a science project during the after-school class Laboratory 101.

more than just the class: the students are all fed a snack at the beginning and dinner before they leave. They are also provided transportation home. They have also some time scheduled to work on homework.

“If we didn’t have an after-school program here, a lot of kids don’t have access to formalized daycare,” Sipe said. “For us to be able to provide (the program) and feed them is really great.”

Nikolas Schuening, a senior at Umatilla High School, serves as a teacher of a film class and a mentor to two sophomore interns. The students are learning about all aspects of film, including writing scripts, editing, 3-D animation and acting.

His two interns, sophomores Alizay Rodriguez and Morgan Burch, watch and take notes as he instructs the eighth graders, and Schuening offers them suggestions for how they can teach the class. Once he graduates, they may be able to pick it up.

“That’s how we keep the program going,” Sipe said. “Students passing on their knowledge.”

Sipe, who has been Umatilla’s superintendent since 2007, was recently a speaker on a panel at the University of Southern California during a forum about the importance of after-school programs.

Sipe said she picked up a lot of tips from the event.

“A number of mayors were there,” she said. “I’ll be working with city management to see if they’re open to contributing financially.”

She also likes the idea of getting students to take more ownership of the program.

“One representative from Atlanta said they have student councils within the after-school program. I like that idea,” she said.

She said the most important thing about the program is allowing kids to engage in a subject they’re truly interested in.

“The key with after school is that it’s not about what’s being taught to them,” Sipe said. “It’s about what they want to learn.”

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PENDLETON: Roberts said adopting the ACLU policies wouldn’t affect how police conduct business

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included we would be a better community and a community that people would be proud to be a part of.”

Beers, an English instructor at Blue Mountain Community College, said BMCC already had “safe spaces” on campus, although she was unaware if any other cities in Eastern Oregon had adopted the ACLU’s list.

Thanks to state law, police chief Stuart Roberts told the council that the city was already practicing many of the policies and rules listed by the ACLU.

Roberts said the exception was a rule that required immigration enforcement agents to always wear duty

jackets and make their badges visible at all times while in city facilities.

He added that officers don’t usually detain suspects in the police department and rarely come into contact with immigration enforcement.

Roberts said adopting the ACLU policies wouldn’t affect how Pendleton police conduct business or the department’s budget, meaning he didn’t have a strong opinion on the list one way or the other.

Councilor John Brenne worried that President Donald Trump’s threats to strip federal funding from sanctuary cities would hurt Pendleton.

Both Roberts and city attorney Nancy Kerns were unsure if the Trump adminis-

tration would legally be able to level punitive measures against sanctuary cities.

Sometimes the council’s deliberations resembled glass half-empty or glass half-full argument. While Fairley thought there was no downside to adopting the ACLU policies, councilor Neil Brown saw no upside.

Ultimately, Beers’ request couldn’t find enough supporters on the council besides Fairley and the council took no action.

For more on the late council meeting, visit www.eastoregonian.com and see Thursday’s newspaper.

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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

The Hermiston City Council listens to the testimony of former fire chief Pat Hart during a special session council meeting on the fate of the Hermiston Conference Center on Tuesday in Hermiston.

HERMISTON: Offered chamber move into basement of Carnegie Library

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center.

According to a presentation by assistant city manager Mark Morgan, in 2015-2016 the center had gross revenues of \$216,900, split between event revenues and \$91,100 of transient room tax revenue contributed by the city. The gross expenses for running the center were \$198,700. The \$18,200 profit was split three ways between the chamber, capital improvements and the city.

Morgan said in the current fiscal year, event revenues for the center were down 35 percent, mostly due to competition from the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center. He said that put the chamber in a bad position, and caused instances where the city’s parks and recreation department was not able to book the center for recreational classes in the hope that a paying customer would instead fill the slot.

As a result, city staff proposed a plan that would see the parks and recreation department move into the current chamber offices and take over the building’s management, in order to better balance EOTEC and the conference center.

“There are a lot of opportunities for synergy between the two facilities,” Morgan said. “It gives us more control of scheduling.”

The city is not contractually obligated to offer office space to the chamber, but the plan included an offer for the chamber to move into the basement of the Carnegie Library across from city hall, which the city is spending \$125,000 to remodel.

Chamber supporters were not fans of that idea. Bryan Wolfe pointed out that when potential new businesses come into town it’s usually the chamber of commerce, not city hall, where they go first for information and to get a feel for the town. He wanted to know if a basement was where the city wanted to send those people. Pat Hart asked the same thing.

“I don’t believe you’ll find a progressive community in Oregon or in the Northwest that you will find their chamber of commerce in a windowless basement,” Hart said.

Chamber board member



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Hermiston assistant city manager Mark Morgan talks about the budget of the Hermiston Conference Center while giving the staff report to the city council on Tuesday in Hermiston.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Attendees overflow out into the lobby of Hermiston City Hall during a special session of the Hermiston City Council about the fate of the Hermiston Conference Center on Tuesday.

Bob Green said it seemed the problems stem from the misrepresentations of EOTEC, not the conference center, and said EOTEC “was never envisioned to replace the conference center and was not promoted that way.”

Several commenters questioned the city’s motives, asking whether the move was just a temporary step toward selling the building for a profit or re-purposing it into a new city hall or a youth center. They also expressed a concern that events like the Festival of Trees, which organizers preferred to keep at the conference center, would be forced to move out to EOTEC to make room for city-sponsored events.

City councilors pushed back on all of those concerns, insisting repeatedly that the building would continue to operate as a conference and community center and would still be open to events like the Festival of Trees.

“The talk of the conference center going away or being shut down has never

been a conversation I’ve been a part of,” councilor Doug Primmer said.

Councilor Doug Smith said the city “meant no disrespect” by offering up the basement of the Carnegie Library; it is simply the only space the city had available to give. He said after \$125,000 worth of renovations it would be a much more attractive space, and noted that the chamber was free to pursue other options.

In the end the council voted to not renew its contract with the chamber in 2018, and to offer the Carnegie Library space to the chamber for its offices. Because the chamber’s conference center manager recently resigned, the city will also provide, at no cost to the chamber, a parks and recreation staff member to fill that position for the duration of 2017 as a way to begin training city staff to run the center in 2018.

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