

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OUR VIEW

A hill to thrive on or die on

The industrial land that surrounds the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport has been at the forefront of Pendleton’s economic plans for decades. It took many years to convince city councilors and taxpayers to invest millions to upgrade road access to the site in 2009 and purchase nearby property soon after. City officials had somewhere between a hope and a promise that industrial development would be close behind.

We all know what happened next. The development never came but a deep recession did, leaving behind a pristine and mostly idle road in Pendleton while industrial development soared in Boardman and Hermiston thanks to their natural advantages — a river and a rail line and two highways.

That bet on industrial development, and its resulting lack of payoff, would later hurt the city when it tried to convince taxpayers of the need to raise taxes and fees to pay for infrastructure.

Now there has been a shift in focus, and a major one at that. The Eastern Oregon Regional Airport — which sits next to the long-touted empty land — had mostly been an afterthought, running up debt and taxing other city services. Sure it was an asset, but it was also an albatross — much too big and expensive for a city that has seen airline business go elsewhere.

But unmanned aerial vehicles (also called UAVs or drones) provided a lifeline, and Pendleton was chosen as a test site because it was big and empty and because of the effort of city administration. Economic development director and airport manager Steve Chrisman said this industry could be the future of Pendleton, and sprout manufacturers and R&D centers that could rival Wichita.

That hype of remaking the Pendleton economy has quieted down considerably in the intervening years, even as use of the range has taken off. As of now, a reliable number of companies are sending crews to test

drones, paying money directly to the airport to rent space and equipment, and also directly to owners of local businesses to feed, house and entertain the visiting professionals.

The airport is no longer losing money, but it’s a bit of a stretch to say it is making money. It is operating at a profit for the moment, buoyed by millions in state grants and two full-time employees, whose salaries are also paid by the state grant. Once that expires, the salaries for those crucial positions will have to come out of the airport budget (or another grant).

Chrisman does note that revenue is rising dramatically — doubling this fiscal year and projected to double again next year. If the city builds new hangars (private companies are reluctant to do it themselves, because they cannot own property and facilities on a federal airfield), Chrisman says he could fill them immediately and for years into the future. Easy decision there — build the things and let’s have them pay for themselves in a few years.

The city argues the \$25 million, multiple-stage investment at the airport and a new industrial park is just as clear a choice. But we think it deserves more scrutiny than it received from a crickets-quiet city council, who barely deigned to discuss this pivot to an expensive new project.

Chrisman and City Manager Robb Corbett say the dollars are needed to strike while the iron is hot, and to eventually make the old Airport Road industrial park become a shovel-ready site. They say that development off-airport will now come via the airport itself. And an expensive upgrade to

water and sewer lines to each place is necessary to help fuel that growth.

But there is real risk now, and first is that pesky airport ownership law. The city will own whatever is built on airport land, and the liability will rest with it. The second is the risky nature of the drone industry itself. It seems pretty clear that drones will become a larger part of society in the next generation, but how long will rural testing sites like Pendleton be useful? Even the folks working in the industry don’t know.

Mayor John Turner and Chrisman sounded out of touch when they told the editorial board that because the unemployment rate is near record lows, jobs are no longer as important as the airport park helping to pay down its debt and contribute to the general fund. Sure, there are open positions at Keystone and Wildhorse. But the kind of jobs we hope our recently graduated seniors come back to fill and create are still few and far between in Pendleton. And the housing we need to keep them here doesn’t exist either. The twin problems of housing and employment that are bedeviling the city are not solved by the huge outlay at the airport.

It takes a bit of mental gymnastics to follow Corbett’s assertion that the \$25 million in infrastructure spending at the airport benefits anyone else in the city besides the airport. We’ll agree that a water reservoir at the site can provide backup supply to the rest of the city in case of emergency. But for a city millions of dollars behind in deferred maintenance of water lines elsewhere, the focus of money and work on lines to the airport is a detriment, not a benefit to most residents. We’re paying for it, too, as city water rate increases

have been put in effect and others are expected.

It’s disappointing that city council hasn’t raised these concerns. We understand why an economic development director would want to push forward with this plan, but we don’t understand why elected officials wouldn’t have some pushback. They are the people who take the heat when water fees increase, when a resident mocks the “road to nowhere,” when someone laments the lack of good housing and jobs in Pendleton and the city’s lack of concern.

We don’t believe councilors should be scared to make a bold move, but it’s their duty to demand a clear accounting and a full interrogation.

The previous council, city manager and mayor’s legacy is currently defined, at least in part, by the Airport Road decision and the lack of a payoff thus far. They were later saddled with that legacy when the city needed community support to tackle other challenges, and they didn’t get that support.

The current mayor, city manager and council will now have their legacy tied up in this risky gamble, which could pay off handsomely but could just as easily fall short. As Chrisman tells it, the worst-case scenario is a robust drone testing site that creates a steady stream of income for the city and digs the airport out of debt. We see the possibility of a worse fate — as the drone industry matures, companies could go elsewhere, leaving an empty Airport Road and mostly-empty airport. But now with just a bunch more money sunk into them.

The \$25 million bet is not one we would place with our money, so how could we recommend doing it with yours?

We agree with the mayor’s desire to find ways to send money down from airport hill to city coffers, rather than the other way around. Councilors should question if this is the best way to achieve that.

YOUR VIEWS

Draft-dodger Trump can’t talk patriotism

The Donald is keeping up his petty and childish “put-down” of professional athletes who refuse to bow down and demonstrate their respect for the military by little Donald’s narrow and self-serving definition of respect. When Colin Kaepernick first started taking a knee during renditions of the national anthem before games, it was in protest of police brutality of people of color across the country. However, Donald twisted and manipulated the issue into his own self-serving “issue” that the athletes were being disrespectful to the country and military.

It is blatant hypocrisy for The Donald to accuse others of being disrespectful to the military, and to strongly imply they are traitors. Here’s why: When the Vietnam War was at its height, little Donald was eligible for the draft, but he shopped around for a doctor who, for the right price, wrote a letter to his local draft board attesting that little Donald had “bone spurs” that were very “painful” and he should receive a medical deferment from military service.

The con job worked, and little Donald Trump evaded military service by literally buying his way out with daddy’s money. On the other hand, I have a friend who protested against the war by refusing to be drafted into the service. The big difference between him and little Donald is my friend has principles, and he paid a steep price for it — he served his time in federal prison for refusing to serve in a war he could not morally support, just like many others, and I respect them for taking such a stand. Modern history, and a blanket pardon, has proved them right for their principled

actions.

However, who can respect little Donald Trump, our Commander-in-Chief, for the phony method he evaded military service? A more appropriate title for The Donald is Evader-in-Chief. LeBron James had it right when he commented that it used to be an honor to be invited to the White House upon winning a world championship, until Trump showed up.

Also, the 2017 NBA champion Golden State Warrior’s declined a White House invitation, and have already announced they have no interest in a White House visit if they win again. So, the Philadelphia Eagles are clearly not alone. The Donald has demeaned and degraded the office of The President of the United States in numerous ways, but to list them all here is way beyond the scope and purpose of this short letter.

Bob Shippentower
Pendleton

\$25 million for UAS park benefits city as whole

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with the editorial board and answer questions related to the last council workshop. In our workshop we discussed expanding water and sewer infrastructure at the airport and the potential for a federal grant which would allow for new hangars and the creation of additional property that is fully served with roads and utilities. I would like to add perspective with regard to your headline “\$25 million investment planned at new UAS industrial park.”

The \$3 million federal grant we have applied for requires a \$3 million match. As you correctly report, a federal grant will allow the construction of new hangars on



the airfield and create additional shovel-ready property for future development. Currently, there is no available hanger space and we have new customers coming to use the airport.

The city of Pendleton is proposing that we match the federal grant with water and sewer infrastructure that we have been planning since 2015. To pay for the projects, the city increased water and sewer rates. In reference to the \$25 million in your article, this work not only allows development at the UAS test range, it also

provides backup water supply for the entire city, replaces old pipes, pumps and allows us to extend infrastructure to provide service for future construction.

This work can be completed as development occurs. It could be constructed in a couple of years or a couple of decades. We simply think it makes good sense to plan for the future now.

Robb Corbett
City manager
Pendleton

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