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EAST OREGONIAN

PINION

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OUR VIEW

Water questions in search of answers

In the West, few resources evoke more passion than water. The reason is obvious: Everything comes down to the quantity and quality of water.

That’s well illustrated across Oregon. In the Klamath Falls region, the periodic shortage of water is well-known, as are the many demands placed on it.

Analogous stories can be found in many areas east of the Cascades, as agriculture, urban growth, residential and industrial uses, fish and other environmental concerns collide.

Even on the west side of Oregon, where ample precipitation is the rule, its seasonality and limited storage put stress on cities and farms. Protected fish and other species also have a major impact on the quantity of water available at any given time.

Because of the critical importance water holds for every aspect of life, it’s surprising that Oregon is just now developing a plan for managing it in the years to come. More clearly, the state does have a strategy, but has done little to put it into effect.

That could change in the near future, as state water managers, in conjunction with their regional counterparts, put together a plan to better manage surface and ground water.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The Columbia River, shown flowing past the Interstate 82 bridge, is one of North America’s great waterways, yet it is barely mentioned as a source of water.

During the course of developing this “Water Vision” managers have asked for comments, and we have some. We also have questions. For example:

- Why are people in regions, such as Klamath Falls, left fighting for their livelihoods, often as the result of state actions, or inactions?
- Why don’t cities, such as Salem and Portland, get their water from

the Willamette River, which runs through them? Instead, Salem gets much of its water from the North Santiam River 20 miles away, and Portland gets some water from the Willamette but most of it from anywhere else. Wouldn’t it make more sense for those and other cities on the river to clean it up instead of taking water from other sources?

- The video introducing the “Water

Vision” refers to providing clean, affordable water to Oregonians. Why is it that some residents of small towns are paying nearly \$100 a month for water and sewer service, while other cities, whose overloaded sewage systems sometimes empty directly into the Willamette, pay much less?

- The video also says the state’s water infrastructure has been pretty much ignored for the past 50 years. Why is that? Is it a case of misplaced priorities? Storage, including dams and aquifer recharge, continues to be the ongoing need in Oregon, yet little has been done at the state level to maintain or develop it.

- The Columbia River — one of North America’s great waterways — flows along much of the northern border of Oregon, yet it is barely mentioned as a source of water. Why is that? Wouldn’t it make sense to tap the Columbia as a source of water for municipal use and irrigation, as Washington state has?

These and other questions represent the “elephant in the living room” as water managers look to the future, but they can also represent solutions.

Our hope is that all sources of water will be “on the table” as Oregon’s leaders plan for the future.

YOUR VIEWS

Can we really trust City Hall to deliver?

City Hall has completed its presentation to all the civic groups that control the ballot boxes — by that, I mean those people most likely to vote. So, now it’s the general public’s turn. If history repeats itself, we’ll more than likely get an ultimatum, and that was the city’s position at the first public meeting. The presentation was short and very professional, but the message was quite clear — we are going to raise a million dollars to fix the streets, and we are not going to make any cuts in current expenditures. We’ll listen to your concerns, but we’ve decided taxes or fees are going up, so which do you prefer? That was the only question asked.

Their defense for the requirement to raise taxes versus making any cuts is that those cuts would have to come from the general fund, and that’s the portion of the budget that funds the police and fire departments, and that is simply not true. Examples, you say? That bike trail complex at the airport that the city council reluctantly approved to be developed and operated privately without city funding? Seems now the Parks Department is up to its eyeballs in that operation now. Where do you suppose that extra \$100,000 came from that magically appeared in their budget? Then there’s that \$55,000 they gave to the Pendleton Downtown Association. Projects funded from the general fund. They can always find money, despite the fact they claim a budget already cut to the bone.

What about the marijuana tax? They pledged half for streets based on \$200,000 in revenue. When it turned out to be much higher, the amount committed to streets remained at \$100,000.

What concerns me the most is that “sunset” clause that promises any tax or fee increase required for the project will be eliminated in 10 years. As an example, City Hall cites that temporary gas tax used to construct the “road to nowhere.” Sure, the road was finished and the tax went away. The fact that the project was a dismal failure, and has since been abandoned, is never mentioned. The city, specifically our Public Works Department, has a history of poor

planning on projects that required additional funding of up to \$100,000, such as remapping city utility systems, an addition to the Convention Center, and the now infamous Eighth Street Bridge project. Then there’s that surprise \$87,000 DEQ fine. What are they planning after the “sunset”? Chances are neither the mayor nor any of the council members will be here to accept any responsibility for another failure.

The only uncertainty at City Hall seems to be who gets the largest pay raise.

Rick Rohde
Pendleton

No good reason to send our children to war

“Amazing Grace,” done by bagpipes, seemed worth a click as I thought about Memorial Day last spring. Part way through the montage honoring our veterans was a beautiful young woman lying on a fresh grave. This is now as close as she can get to her husband. He was one of our neighbors, one of our children, one of our grandchildren, someone of our village. There will be no future for him, no family to be a part of, no career to build, he won’t get to sit before a keyboard as a retired guy.

If we send our young into harm’s way it must be for a damn good reason. And there have been such reasons, at least twice in world war. The USA has saved the world from the conquering evil forces twice. All we asked of the saved nations was a piece of ground to bury our dead children who answered the call to duty. It was a necessary war, if there is such a thing.

But to send them into a part of the world that has never had a lasting peace, where they have always hated and killed each other, is not a “damn good reason.” Decades we have been there, in harm’s way, and as we pull back they pelt us with stones because we are not staying to keep them from killing each other.

For 20 years our children have lain on graves, for what solution? We need to rethink this.

Ron Linn
Stanfield

OTHER VIEWS

City council seeks input on street maintenance funding

Pendleton residents have long been concerned with potholes and maintenance of city streets, and for good reason. The Pavement Management Budget Options Report completed in 2018 revealed that concerns are well-founded. On average 75% of the useful life of our streets is used up, and unless we do something we can anticipate worsening streets and increasing maintenance costs with each passing year.

With a value of \$115 million, the 87 miles of paved streets we have in Pendleton are both our most used and our most valuable asset. We currently spend nearly \$1.2 million per year on street maintenance. \$545,000 comes from Pendleton’s share of state and federal gas tax; \$438,000 comes from the street utility fee we all pay as part of our monthly utility bill; and \$173,000 comes from the city’s General Fund, including \$100,000 in taxes collected from marijuana sales in Pendleton.

The reason our streets get worse each year, even as we spend over \$1 million per year on maintenance, is the reality of deferred maintenance. Deferred maintenance is the amount of money we should have spent on maintaining our streets but haven’t because we haven’t chosen to make it available. In the 2018 Pavement Management Budget Options Report deferred maintenance — the amount of money we should have spent on street maintenance but haven’t — was \$12 million. As big a number as that is, at current funding levels deferred maintenance is projected to approach \$40 million in the next 10 years. The reason for this is the perniciousness of the deferred maintenance cycle. We don’t spend enough to maintain our streets, so each year our streets get worse. As our streets get worse, maintenance costs go up. As maintenance costs go up, we can do less maintenance causing streets to get worse — and on and on. This cycle will only stop under one of two conditions: we either adequately fund street maintenance,

or we allow all our streets to fail, at which point we will be facing a replacement cost of \$115 million.

As a community, we’ve known about this problem for decades. By choosing not to adequately fund street maintenance, we have by default chosen to allow our streets to fail. Based on public outreach, we know that fixing our streets is the community’s highest priority, so this year the city council is committed to making a different choice.

From information we have from consulting engineers and our own engineering staff, we know that if we increase our street maintenance funding by an additional \$1 million per year, within 10 years we can bring the majority of our streets into good condition and keep them there, thereby assuring the most efficient use of public funds for street maintenance. While the council is committed to raising this funding

by the end of this year, we are looking for input on how funding should be raised.

For the past six months, the council has been talking to civic groups and has hosted three public meetings to talk to residents about street funding options. A list of funding options, including a survey where you can provide input on your preferred funding options until Nov. 15, can be found on the city’s web page at <https://pendleton.or.us/streetfunding>.

Our streets are in crisis and it is time we do something to make sure we pass on a better street system to future generations of Pendletonians than the failing system we have today. Please complete the survey at the link above, and if you have any questions please contact me or other councilors because, while doing nothing is no longer an option, we need your input to find a funding solution that best meets the needs and values of our community.

Scott Fairley represents Ward 2 on the Pendleton City Council.



SCOTT FAIRLEY
COMMENT