EAST OREGONIAN
OPINION

CHRISTOPHER RUSH, *Publisher* | KATHRYN B. BROWN, *Owner* | ANDREW CUTLER, *Editor* | WYATT HAUPT JR., *News Editor* | JADE McDOWELL, *Hermiston Editor*

Founded October 16, 1875

OUR VIEW

Time for residents to step up

A plan by the Pendleton City Council to create three new revenue streams to boost street funding showed a certain degree of courage and foresight, but more voter input will be needed before anything can be set in stone.

The city voted unanimously to push a blueprint to have city staff create three tax and fee ordinances, including a 4-cent gas levy, a $2 hotel room fee tariff and a $3 boost to street utility fees.

If all three of the proposals are enacted, the city estimates it will collect more than $1 million per year for road maintenance. The city also plans to slash $110,000 in the general fund to get more money for street upgrades.

The council deserves credit for tackling what is a complicated problem, and one that isn't going to go away. Pendleton's streets need to be upgraded. And, as is usual in relativity small, rural towns, there isn't a vast reservoir of money to do repairs.

The council, as elected representatives, have completed their work. They methodically studied different plans, debated and developed a solution.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The intersection of Southeast Ninth Drive and Byers Avenue in Pendleton shows signs of wear with cracks and potholes. Byers Avenue is on the city's list of road repair projects.

Now it is up to voters to get involved. Democracy demands that both of its pillars — elected representatives and the people — do their jobs effectively. Voters now need to review the three plans, evaluate their effectiveness, and then give feedback to their elected leaders.

That feedback can't be framed within the context of a shouting match or criticism but, instead, should be outlined by a reasonable discourse, a give-and-take of views and opinions.

If voters have questions — and they should — then their best course is to reach out to their elected leaders to find answers.

While some of the proposed taxes appear to weigh most heavily on out-of-town commerce, others may hit area residents in the pocketbook as well.

The council can't make informed decisions without feedback from voters. They've done the hard work — developed a possible way forward — but now it is up to residents to help. There may even be residents who have better ideas about how to generate more revenue and, if so, their views should be listened to by the council.

In the future, there will surely be public meetings sponsored by the council about these issues. That is another avenue local residents can take to deliver comments.

Democracy will only be successful if everyone plays a role. Now is the time to step up if you are a resident and have a strong opinion about the council's plans for new taxes and fees.

OTHER VIEWS

Trump was right to stand up for vet

Chief Petty Officer Eddie Gallagher is a highly decorated combat veteran who made the mistake of posing for a photograph with a dead ISIS combatant.

It was a breach of etiquette, to be sure. And it was not good optics for a Navy SEAL to have done such a thing.

But it is a minor charge, the only thing a military tribunal was able to convict him of amid a complicated trial that was marred by accusations of prosecutorial misconduct and a witness who changed his story on the stand. Despite the relatively minor charge, some in the Navy wanted to remove Gallagher from the SEALs, stripping him of his Trident pin, a serious consequence.

Throughout the trial and the debate over Gallagher's future, one of his strongest supporters has been President Trump, who tweeted: "The Navy will NOT be taking away Warfighter and Navy SEAL Eddie Gallagher's Trident Pin. This case was handled very badly from the beginning. Get back to business!"

CHRISTINE FLOWERS
COMMENT

I agree with the president on this one.

It seems fair to argue that Gallagher might've had a prickly personality and wasn't the best example of military excellence.

What doesn't seem fair is trying to railroad him out of a career as a punitive reaction to the acquittal on more serious charges. But that is exactly what the Navy brass, under the leadership of Navy Secretary Richard Spencer, tried to do.

After the mixed decision was handed down by the tribunal in July, the Navy pursued an internal inquiry to decide whether Gallagher should be demoted and stripped of the Trident pin, essentially kicking him out of the SEALs.

The Navy suspended its internal inquiry, but Secretary Spencer was reportedly angry that Trump had intervened in a personnel decision by overruling Gallagher's demotion and demanding he keep the Trident pin. He tried to engage in some back channel moves without notifying Defense Secretary Mike Esper and was fired. On his way out, Spencer criticized Trump with a parting shot:

"[I don't think the president] really understands the full definition of a warfighter. A warfighter is a profession of arms and a profession of arms has standards that they have to be held to, and they hold themselves to."

I am not an expert on military justice or the code. But as a lay person who is the daughter of a Cold War veteran, the niece of a Marine, the great-niece of a man who parachuted onto the beaches of Normandy, and the cousin of combat veterans in Vietnam, I know what honor looks like. It is not "perfection." It is not stoicism. It is not the almost inhuman ability to suppress our natural emotions in the face of brutality.

Honor is what Gallagher showed by being on the front lines in a war that had taken the lives of friends and comrades, men killed by adherents of that sick ideology embraced by the dead ISIS fighter.

To worry about the optics and flawed etiquette of posing for the cameras with a vanquished enemy is outrageous, and the Navy leaders who pushed for Gallagher's demotion and expulsion from the SEALs were not defending the reputation of the service. They were bowing to PC priorities.

This was not Abu Ghraib. This was a photo of a dead ISIS combatant and the men who were glad he couldn't hurt any more of their brothers.

There will be those who will defend the Navy's right to clean its own house simply because they hate the president so much. There are others who would defend the Navy regardless of who was in the White House. Both are wrong.

Eddie Gallagher, who has announced his retirement, never should have been convicted of posing for an offensive photo.

The president was right to stand up for him. The shame is that the Navy didn't.

———

Christine Flowers is a syndicated freelance columnist.

Fixing the roads — 'a decades-old problem'

The top priority of Pendleton's citizenry is to fix Pendleton's deteriorating streets and to provide sustainable funding to keep the streets in good condition. In response, the city council has reached agreement on a solution to this difficult and expensive problem.

The council has been studying street maintenance for two years, trying to understand the extent of the problem and to determine how much money it will take to provide sustainable repairs. For decades, the city spent only its share of gas taxes on street repair. This was typically about $350,000 per year. Over time, this has resulted in about $12 million in deferred maintenance. The problem is getting bigger every year and is estimated to become a $26 million backlog in 10 years at the current rate of spending.

JOHN TURNER
COMMENT

Over the past four years the amount budgeted for street maintenance has been gradually increased by using a new in 2015 street utility fee, marijuana tax receipts, cuts to other parts of the general fund and increased state gas tax money. In the current fiscal year, Pendleton will spend about $1.2 million on its streets. Engineering studies show, however, that the city really needs to spend $2.2 million each year for the coming decade if it expects to get its streets into a condition that can be affordably sustained. So, the task has been to determine the best way to come up with an additional $1 million per year for street repairs.

The council put together a list of hypothetical ideas on how to raise this revenue and made some 30 presentations to civic groups and residents to get their reactions. The most popular of the ideas presented were to increase hotel taxes, begin a city gas tax and charge a fee for large events. At the city council session on Tuesday, the council voted to approve a way to move forward by:

•Asking voters to approve a 4-cent gas tax that would expire after 10 years. This tax is estimated to raise approximately $440,000 per year and would be on the ballot in May 2020.

•Approving a hotel room fee or tax equivalent to $2 per night. This is estimated to raise about $306,000 per year. State law requires that 70% of the revenues generated by this fee or tax to be used for tourism- or entertainment-related activities, so these new revenues will be used to replace general fund dollars that are used to support these types of activities, freeing up $306,000 to be used for street repair.

•Increasing the current street utility fee of $5.21 per month by $3 per month, resulting in about $250,000 in new revenues annually. There will be a provision to exempt low income families from paying this new fee.

•Making cuts to its general fund in order to raise another $110,000 annually for street maintenance.

The idea of charging an event fee was endorsed, but there remain quite a few questions on how this fee will be administered and what events will be required to collect it. The council will work with a joint committee of representatives from the larger events and the education community to determine the best way to administer such a fee. The leaders of the Round-Up, Happy Canyon and the Whisky Fest have declared their willingness to work with the city on the issue. Once the questions can be answered, the goal will be to raise at least $95,000 a year from an event fee. This committee will begin meeting in January.

A precise date for implementing the new hotel fee or tax and the increase in the street utility fee has not been set, but residents can expect to see them started in time to impact the 2020-21 budget, which begins on July 1, 2020. The Pendleton Development Commission recently approved a one-time contribution of $1.4 million for street maintenance within the urban renewal district, which will also help reduce the overall deferred maintenance backlog.

The council knows that new fees or taxes are rarely popular and it will require tremendous moral courage and resolve to stand up to the criticism that always comes with any new project of this size. We are showing our residents that we are doing what you are telling us to do. So, when the vocal minority of keyboard warriors start writing letters about government waste and its insatiable appetite for new dollars, please remember we are going down this path in order to fix a decades-old problem.

———

John Turner is the mayor of Pendleton.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published.

Send letters to the editor to editor@eastoregonian.com, or via mail to Andrew Cutler, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801