

OUR VIEW

The scourge of blighted buildings

As downtowns across Eastern Oregon age, a number of older buildings — some historic, some not — are in desperate need of repairs, upgrades or, in some extreme cases, demolition.

As a case in point, the city of Pendleton is currently grappling with what to do about a vacant and dilapidated building, the Edwards Apartments, at the corner of Southeast Dorion Avenue and Southeast Sixth Street near downtown.

This is not a new issue, as the building has been vacant for years and the property was deemed uninhabitable in 2011. City leaders are hearing from constituents demanding that something be done with the eyesore.

The apparent options before the Pendleton Development Commission, and ultimately the city council, are whether to 1.) buy the building and demolish it, 2.) buy the building and restore it, or 3.) restore the building under a partnership with the current owner.

Charles Denight, the associate director of the commission, offered a fourth option involving the city working with neighboring property owners to buy the property and do something with it.

But given that this property has sat derelict and deteriorated for more than a decade without any improvements,



EO file photo

The Pendleton City Council requested additional time to mull over a proposal to acquire the vacant Edwards Apartments complex at the corner of Southeast Dorion Avenue and Southeast Sixth Street in Pendleton. The complex, which was constructed in 1909, has sat vacant since it was deemed uninhabitable by the city in 2011.

we are more inclined to agree with yet another option advocated by Chuck Wood, a former city councilor and commission chairman — use the existing laws to compel the property owner to do something about it.

This “tough love” option is often considered too draconian for small towns that wish to maintain friendly working relationships with local build-

ing owners and property developers. Nobody wants to be the bad guy. But in this case, we believe it is warranted and long overdue.

The building owner has expressed interest in selling the property back to the city for \$50,000. He paid just \$37,900 for the property in 2018. Although the owner may have had the best of intentions, no improvements

have been made and the building only decays further. Frankly, it’s a black eye.

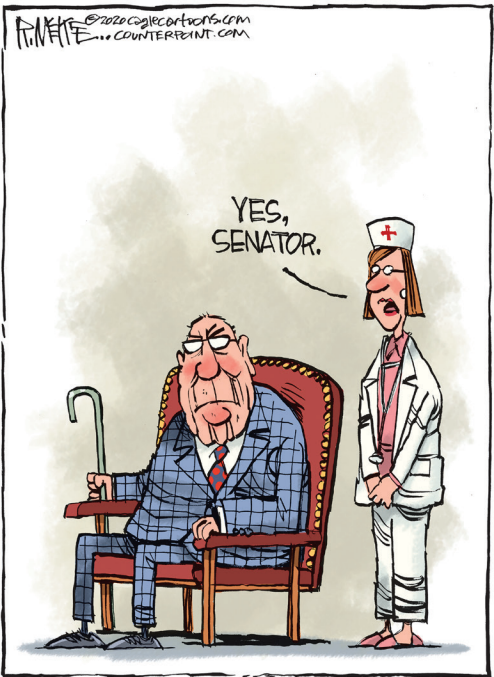
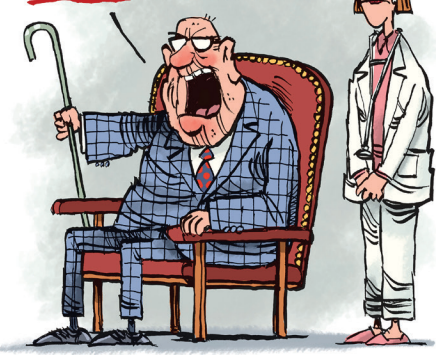
It would truly set a bad precedent for the city to allow the owner of any dilapidated, condemned building to profit from such a sales transaction. Owners assume both equity and liability when making real estate purchases, and as such, should be compelled to adhere to basic building codes.

This is why we believe Mr. Wood has the better argument. We further believe it sets a bad precedent if existing ordinances governing code violations are allowed to be ignored. Enforcement of current laws should send a loud and clear message to owners of delinquent buildings that it will not be tolerated.

We are not intending to pick on this particular owner here, but his building just happens to represent a prime example of urban decay and blight that none of us who take pride in our cities should allow.

And, to be clear, this is not just an issue for Pendleton. Virtually all cities and towns in Eastern Oregon have their share of problem properties. Rundown buildings across Umatilla County, often owned by out-of-state landlords who are unresponsive to attempts by local leaders to remediate, need to be sent a loud and clear message: Your vacant, run-down, and sometimes dangerous buildings will not be tolerated.

IT'S LATE AND I'M TIRED! DO I HAVE TO KEEP WATCHIN' THIS IMPEACHMENT?!



YOUR VIEWS

Edwards Apartments, North Bank still unfinished business

After discussing the derelict Edwards building for who knows how many times, our city leaders have finally put their foot down and vowed to resolve the issue, sort of. Once again they’ve agreed that they need more time to “study” their options, and will again turn to the city attorney’s office for a final solution. Sound familiar?

I was recently accused of authoring a number of misconceptions about the North Bank of the Umatilla Advisory Committee’s work, so I made it a point to attend their Jan. 22 public meeting with an open mind and get a preview of their work. The consensus of what I heard, once the “consultant’s” presentation was completed, was that there is no money for any program, and everyone is unhappy with the current way the city, the steward of our public property, maintains this property. They don’t like the goats, the current vegetation (brush and noxious weeds), the homeless camps, and the loss of natural habitat, but seem to be happy with their well-groomed dog park.

The city of Pendleton leadership has had a proclivity, an insatiable appetite per se, to accumulate property that they have neither the expertise nor resources to maintain properly. In an attempt to rid itself of some

of this excess property, city planning went to great lengths to evaluate excess property and get it back on the tax rolls. That’s when a small portion of property at the bottom of Northwest Seventh Street was deemed suitable for development, partitioned off, and offered for sale.

Since this area had been a family playground for years, those residents played up the sentimental value and the damage to the environment that would result from the sale, the city’s process came to a halt, a committee was formed, and that’s where we’re at. People have also forgotten that the original plan was for a pathway along the north side, which was vehemently opposed by residents and spawned the birth of our current levee walkway.

I did have to chuckle a bit when the “consultant” mentioned the Leo Adler walkway around Baker City as an example of a project the committee could pursue. If you are not familiar with Mr. Adler, he was a very wealthy and generous resident that provided the funding of various projects, the walkway and an athletic complex included, throughout Baker City, and a college scholarship program for all eligible Baker County high school students. We don’t have such a benefactor here in Pendleton.

Rick Rohde
Pendleton

ANOTHER MILE

Finding joy in doing more

There’s always a twinkle in her eye when she talks about what fills her life these days. Rae is someone I’ve gotten to know after she retired from the workplace she started at when she was 17.

Her roots go seven generations deep in our region, so she knows so many folks here in Eastern Oregon. Following her interest in history, she saw possibility at the Heritage Station museum, perhaps at the front desk welcoming guests. The director saw a better fit for Rae with the needs of the collection, sorting and entering items into the database, locating appropriate storage sites to make them available to citizens in genealogical or property questions. She volunteers two days a week, sharing the expertise that comes from life-long experience in a place.

Rae’s family is at the center of her interests. While she’s not the image we have of a matriarch, her role for her children after their father died was as the soul of dependability. Of course she was not alone, grateful to extended family and in-laws in Umatilla, Morrow, Wallowa, Wheeler and Crook counties for their support. These days as a grandmother, she’s still there for her two sons and their families, including two grandsons and a granddaughter on the way. Her calendar has time blocked for her grandson and schoolmates in his kindergarten class, helping out as they learn to draw and narrate their first stories. On a visit to his class, Rae responded when the teacher mentioned a need, though at first unsure about her capabilities. She’s finding that some things are the still the same, while others have changed, but there are always moments of fun. The joy in teaching and learning goes both ways, even for adults helping out in kindergarten, because there’s always something more to be enriched by in the interactions between the young in age and young at heart.

Yet Rae still has time for the community at large. Her many years of maintaining a large produce garden with her children and decades of work in agricultural field research, where she spent many hours cataloging plant and soil samples among other tasks, connected her to the projects of the Dirt Dabblers. A good friend invited her on

a sponsored tour of the BMCC greenhouse, and she’s been a member ever since. She enjoys guest presentations at meetings in addition to the hands-on gardening projects throughout Pendleton. And here too it’s a combination of bringing her expertise while learning new skills as part of the Dabblers’ enthusiastic efforts to beautify Pendleton with professional quality landscaping.

And then there is the committee of citizen volunteers in the state foster system, which Rae joined two years ago at the prompting of an acquaintance at her retirement party. She said yes because she was looking for a

challenge to keep her brain active, but quickly was compelled by the human stories to get involved. There are probably fewer moments of laughter in this group, run under the administration of the county’s office of the Oregon Department of Human Services to support children and their families. Five volunteers from all walks of life meet every month to make sure that children are placed where they will receive the support they need to be

healthy, safe and thrive. In some cases they recommend support services to assist parents toward the success that is hindered by an array of difficulties, including financial need, health challenges, or experiences of personal trauma. The children may have special needs and require additional support services, such as ongoing medical assistance, speech therapy, counseling, or special education support. Sometimes the case files for these children document severe neglect and abuse, traumas that will take many years to heal. To have a role in bringing them to a safe environment is a truly moving experience. And we in your community are grateful to you for your commitment to their wellbeing.

Rae’s friends wonder at how busy she is. She responds that it’s only a few hours here and there. Getting involved with people in her community is a two-way street in giving and receiving, as she finds joy in doing something more.

Regina Braker, a retired educator with journeys through many places and experiences, enjoys getting to know people along the way.



REGINA
BRAKER

COMMENT