

## UNION COUNTY

# Fairgrounds sewer project faces hurdles at the city level

By DAVIS CARBAUGH  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A major sewer line project that would connect running water and sewage to the Union County Fairgrounds is up for debate.

The project, which has been a priority for past fairgrounds operators for decades, seeks to provide functioning permanent restrooms and running water for the multitude of events and regular usage at the La Grande facility. Despite momentum in gaining the necessary funding for the plans, ownership and liability questions at the city level are causing a roadblock in the proposals.

"We have a fair board that has made this a very high priority," Union County Fair Board member Deb Cornford said.

## Prolonged efforts

The Union County Fair Board has advocated for the sewer project since the early 2000s, analyzing the infrastructure needed to complete the project. Anderson Perry & Associates in La Grande first conducted pre-design reports in 2001, periodically doing so in 2007, 2011 and in 2021. The overall project would cost roughly \$2.1 million, broken up into two phases — an initial \$1.52 million has currently been allocated to the first phase of the project through state funding and fundraising efforts. The line would traverse from the fairgrounds, attach to the Second Street bridge and connect to the city's system.

The steps following the potential construction of the pipeline and lift station are causing a hurdle in connecting to the city of La Grande's system — determining ownership and liability, as well as potential repair costs, in the years to come has become an obstacle in negotiations.

"That's the big question, who owns that portion," La Grande Public Works Director Kyle Carpenter said.

Advocates of the project, as well as members of the Union County Fair Board, spoke in turn during the public comment section of the La Grande City Council meeting on Wednesday, May 4, to describe their



Eastern Oregon Beer Festival/Contributed Photo

Attendees at the 2021 Eastern Oregon Beer Festival wait in line to use portable toilets Aug. 14, 2021, at the Union County Fairgrounds, La Grande.

perception of how the connected sewer system would lead to a positive effect on the use of the fairgrounds. The project would connect the fairgrounds to the La Grande water system to allow for running water and functional restrooms — as it stands, the fairgrounds currently rents portable restrooms for events to compensate for the lack of facilities. The location hosts year-round events and serves as an emergency location for the county.

Fair Manager Kathy Gover-Shaw spoke at the meeting, stating the year-round impacts of the fairgrounds and its value to local tourism. She stated that while the facilities host a slew of annual gatherings, the lack of running water and functioning restrooms is limiting the board's ability to host larger festivals and events.

"By improving our wastewater system, we would be able to accommodate much larger, multi-day events and bring even more people into our area," Gover-Shaw said at the meeting.

Gover-Shaw also referred to the fairgrounds' usage as an emergency response area, as well as an asset for camping and outdoor recreation in association with its close proximity to Mount Emily Recreation Area. Board member Amy Horn pointed out the current restroom situation is not handicap accessible, deterring

certain attendees during events and limiting the scope of events that can be hosted.

"Events that go on in La Grande should be as inclusive as possible," Horn said. "We shouldn't be limiting who can attend something just because we don't have restroom facilities."

Fair board members speaking at the regular session provided numerous reasonings for why they see the project as a boon to the local area.

"This space has so much potential to offer our vibrant community," board member Melinda Becker-Bisenius said. "Through this project we will see an increase in tourism, which will result in financial gains for the local economy. Growing our facility with this project will increase the opportunity for events, family gatherings and future growth."

## Ownership, liability factors create complications

La Grande city officials were participatory in the planning process meetings, but financial liability is a deterring factor. Responsibility for potential debt, maintenance costs and ongoing fees all play a role in the city's involvement in connecting the line.

The proposed sewer line would cross over the Grande Ronde River and Interstate 84 via the Second

Street bridge, connecting to the current line at the corner of Lake Avenue and Second Street. Despite the high-volume usage of the fairgrounds and its event capacity, the facility is still treated as a single customer since it would be the only location attached to the new line. Carpenter noted during the council session that, despite the clear social importance of the project, the city must examine the maintenance costs and ongoing fees.

"The requests that are part of this sewerage system are going to be analyzed in the same manner that I would analyze any other account that came to the city," Carpenter said at the meeting. "From my public works director seat, my job is not to measure the social importance of a project, it's to make sure that your water and sewerage systems stay economically viable and that the decisions and recommendations I make to (the city) are based on that analysis alone."

The construction, ownership and management of a new lift station associated with the fairgrounds' sewer line is another discussion item currently up in the air. Carpenter stated that a potential clog during a large-scale event could cause serious setbacks and financial burdens. The city currently owns and operates seven lift stations, with the 26th Street station serving roughly half the city.

"The sticking point with the lift station is who is going to own and operate it, and who would maintain it," La Grande City Manager Robert Strope said at the meeting. "That would be an ongoing commitment to keep it current."

Strope said the project is not as simple as just running the line, noting that ongoing discussions need to be held to determine the specifics of the city's role and spending in the project.

Councilors in attendance voiced support for the proposal, but agreed that a work session is necessary to iron out the details of the city's involvement and the ownership and liability of the sewer line.

## Time is of the essence

Another element of the wastewater project is the Second Street bridge, which is currently

under construction by ODOT.

Union County Commissioner Matt Scarfo, who serves as liaison to the fairgrounds, stated that \$1,520,000 is currently in place for the sewer project and is enough to cover phase one, according to Anderson Perry's analysis. The Union County Fairgrounds received \$1 million from this year's short session and \$270,000 from last year's regular session.

The county also allocated up to \$250,000 in funding through the American Rescue Plan Act to construct the sewer line during ODOT's work on the Second Street bridge, which would avoid closing the roadway again at a later date. Scarfo noted that installing the pipeline may not necessarily cost the full \$250,000, but that the county allocated that amount in order to have enough to cover the project — the total estimated cost is yet to be determined.

The best case scenario would be to complete phase one of the sewer project while the bridge construction is underway, and before the Union County Fair takes over the fairgrounds this summer. But the details of the sewer project must first be worked out.

Strope emphasized that questions still remain in terms of the overall project funding. Phase two of the proposal involves the construction of new restroom facilities after the sewer line is connected to the city's system. A total project cost of approximately \$2.7 million would likely require loans, which Strope identified as another moving part in the process — the unknown of potential borrowing without a guarantee of DEQ loan forgiveness could prove costly to the city, if involved.

La Grande Mayor Steve Clements, along with the council, favored a work session in the near future to continue the discussion of the sewer line with the fair board members. The water and sewer project tops the list of the fair board's goals — a variety of future plans for upgrading the fairgrounds' facilities rely on running water and an up-to-par permanent restroom system. The fair board is currently continuing its fundraising efforts to fund the full project.

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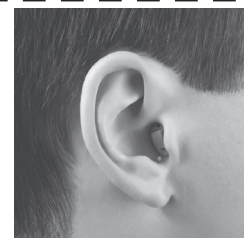
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