

# Council defends latest street funding plan

By Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

It was déjà vu all over again for the Joseph city council at their April 2 meeting.

During the Feb. 5 city council meeting, council members unanimously decided to approve a \$1.3 million street repair levy through a transportation/utility fee of approximately \$11 per month. At a Feb. 24 emergency city council meeting, the council, with one dissenting vote, decided to attach an additional measure allowing for an increase in property taxes should the transportation/utility revenue fall short of its obligation to the bondholders.

The additional measure was made at the behest of Katie Schwab, a vice-president of Wedbush Securities.

Schwab suggested the addition made the bond more attractive to bondholders as guaranteed revenue in case of a shortfall. Without it, Schwab suggested the bond could take as long as five years to fully implement. She also suggested it could keep the city from dipping into general funds to cover possible shortfalls.

Joseph citizen Kathy Bingham opened the April 2 meeting expressing concern about the property tax caveat and its lack of a specific dollar amount. Mayor Dennis Sands explained the reasons for the caveat, which somewhat assuaged Bingham's fears — for awhile — that the council could and would raise and collect property taxes above and beyond the needed amount.

That wasn't the last the

council heard about the measure. An hour and 22 minutes later, Joseph citizen Lem McBurney re-introduced the subject, asking if the measure included a plan B. "This is too open-ended for me. I know it's being driven by demands of the people at the loan, but it seems like the number should be static." McBurney added his taxes were "higher than anyone's."

Kathy Bingham said, "This is going to cost me a thousand dollars a year," although in fact, the measure doesn't specify an amount of property taxes to be levied. It more generally states, "If collections of the transportation utility fee are insufficient, the bonds would be payable from a tax on property in the city."

City attorney Wyatt Baum said Wedbush could possibly

find other alternatives to make up for shortfalls if citizen pushback proved too formidable against the property tax.

Sands said it was too late to amend the ballot measure in any case. Bingham replied she wanted more specificity. "There's no give in there. It could change every year."

Baum said the city had no way to project possible shortfalls. He also said the idea of a property tax levy worked as collateral for the bond company in case of a shortfall in collecting the transportation utility fees and added the small size of the community and its general fund were also mitigating factors.

Some discussion ensued as to possibly first dipping into the general fund to make up for shortfalls in fee collections before instituting the

property tax hikes. This is not stipulated in the measure. Baum added that concerned citizens could take comfort in the fact that Measure 5 established property tax limits.

In regard to a question of people who pay their water/sewer fees but not the transportation utility fees, the council replied it planned an ordinance to shut off their services in that event, and state law allows them to do so.

The general fund idea was again bandied back and forth with some people wondering if the council alone should decide if the fund had enough revenue to allow raiding. It was also unclear if such raiding were allowed without the cooperation of the budget committee.

Councilor Teresa Sajonia then stated to McBurney in

particular, "The city of Joseph really needs this to pass. I understand what you're talking about, and no one wants to pay more taxes. We've worked really hard at finding this happy medium of \$11 a month." She added that even if there were a shortfall, the property tax rates would still be a much smaller amount than the 2014 measure asking for a \$2.46 per thousand increase in property taxes.

The idea was discussed of taking out a newspaper ad to advise the citizenry of the council's intent to look at other options before implementing a property tax increase as well as a door-to-door campaign. Sands also made one more offer to people who are unclear about the two measures. "Call me. I'm in the book."

# Rail-trail talk slated for Hurricane Creek Grange

By Rocky Wilson

Wallowa County Chieftain

Not to be confused with the next official public meeting regarding a feasibility study currently underway to determine if, how, and under

what circumstances a bicycle/pedestrian path could be built along the 63 miles of railroad track between Joseph and Elgin, the Joseph Branch Trail Consortium is sponsoring a public meeting Thursday, April 9, to share perspectives

of similar endeavors now active in other locations regionally.

Dana Kurtz, the Eastern Oregon University student selected to be program project manager for the feasibility study, says the idea behind Thursday's meeting and a second one the night earlier at the Elgin Community Center was spawned by public comments made at a feasibility study meeting last year jointly sponsored by EOU and the Oregon Department of Parks and Recreation (ODPR), the entities conducting that study.

An adjacent landowner, a historian, and a trail association president closely involved with the 84-mile Weiser River Trail (trail only, no rails), locate in Idaho between New Meadows and Weiser, will speak Thursday night, April 9, at the Hurricane Creek Grange, 63081 Hurricane Creek Road in rural Joseph. Another perspective of the rails-and-trail concept will be offered the same evening concerning the 100-mile OC&E Woods Line State Trail, located near Klamath



Rob Ruth/Chieftain

While the topography along this stretch of the WURA rail line, south of Enterprise near Eggleston Lane, would lend itself relatively easily to the addition of a trail, some other portions of the 63-mile line would be more challenging to trail project engineers.

Falls. Speaking on that topic will be Todd Honeywell, a former manager of Wallowa Lake State Park.

The meetings held in Elgin and Joseph are scheduled to last from 6 p.m. until 8 p.m. and, according to a press release circulated by the Joseph Branch Trail Consortium, participants "will discuss their experiences in developing, managing, and maintaining trails." The announced plan is for each of the four speakers

to speak briefly, then respond to questions from the audience.

Rocky Houston, the state trails coordinator for Oregon, will facilitate the two meetings to be held at opposite ends of the railroad line owned by the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority (WURA), the entity that will decide if any further action will be taken after EOU and State Parks hand their final report to the WURA board of directors in

December.

According to Houston, the feasibility study is currently on schedule in terms of concept planning, and EOU is finalizing an economic benefits assessment. A draft existing conditions assessment is already complete.

A survey of randomly selected residents was set to begin early in April. According to the Joseph Branch Trail Consortium's website, the survey will test proposed trail development alternatives.

The project group hopes to have preliminary data from the survey and draft trail design options in hand to review during an advisory committee meeting on May 5.

A new round of public meetings is scheduled in August.

According to Kurtz, an unknown number of survey questionnaires will be mailed by mid-April. In addition to those that are mailed, surveys will also soon be obtainable via the Web at [www.eou.edu/rails-with-trails](http://www.eou.edu/rails-with-trails), or by contacting Kurtz at 509-953-1804.

On a related note, the Wallowa City Council voted March 17 to issue a letter of support endorsing the proposed Rails and Trail concept inside the WURA corridor.

## ATHLETE OF THE WEEK



**DARBY GASSETT**

After driving home eight runs in two league games Friday, Wallowa County Cub sophomore softball player Darby Gasset has been named Athlete of the Week. Gasset, a student at Enterprise

HS, plays shortstop and catcher for the Cubs and is described as a fierce competitor who's "totally wrapped up in sports." The 16-year-old daughter of Gary and Stephanie Gasset also plays volleyball and basketball and maintains a 3.76 GPA. When not engrossed in high school sports, Gasset enjoys many aspects of the outdoors including 4-wheeling and camping. A known characteristic of the young lady's personality, in addition to prioritizing friends and family, is how much empathy she has for others. Gasset won a Stockgrowers' heifer and enjoys caring for it.

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