

Opinions divided at pool stakeholders meeting

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Opinions were split about evenly over the future of a public swimming pool in Grant County during a meeting hosted and moderated by the John Day swim team.

Roughly 40 people attended the April 2 meeting at the Grant County Regional Airport. Pool manager and swim team coach Sabrina Howard and swim team representative Haley Walker moderated the meeting as a neutral party.

With negotiations between John Day and the state Department of Parks and Recreation for the sale of Gleason Pool and four acres of adjacent city parkland already underway, the public pool may cease to operate after the 2020 season.

Representatives from five stakeholder organizations also attended the meeting. Walker said the stakeholders have worked on the pool issue for about six months, but the only decision that had been reached so far was in favor of the most affordable option — a six-lane outdoor pool.

Pool options

John Day City Manager Nick Green noted that the city and the John Day-Canyon City Parks and Recreation District have agreed on a site for a new pool — the upper northwest fields at the Seventh Street Complex. He said it was a logical site choice — out of the floodplain, near the Parks & Rec offices with beautiful views of the mountains to the south.

Green also said, when the city purchased land from the Hill family for a new city park, it signed an agreement saying it would hold money from the sale of Gleason Pool and the adjacent

parkland for five years and dedicate it for a new pool.

The new pool will provide six lanes for competitive swimming. Walker said the narrower five-lane configuration at Gleason Pool poses safety issues during warm-up times prior to swim meets.

At 61 years old this season, Gleason Pool is the second oldest public pool in Oregon. John Day City Councillor Dave Holland, the city's public works director in the past, said fixing the pool would be difficult.

Supply and drain pipes were likely steel or galvanized steel, with a typical lifetime of 10-30 years, Holland said. To replace rusted-out pipes, concrete decking and even the pool bottom would need to be demolished. Some pipes also were under the pool buildings, he said.

Pool costs

The target figures are \$4.5 million for construction of a new pool and about \$100,000 per year for operation, maintenance and a future pool replacement fund, Walker said. A county-wide bond measure is being considered to pay for building a new pool, while stakeholders are discussing ways to come up with the annual funding, she said.

Green said the city has already spent money on consultants for design alternatives and to acquire new parkland. He said he looked at federal grant sources to help bring down a potential bond figure, but federal grants for public pools are typically limited to those connected with a senior center or intended for tourists, he said. That leaves the state as the primary avenue for grant funding, he said.

Initial talks with the



The Eagle/Richard Hanners
From left, John Day pool manager and swim team coach Sabrina Howard, John Day City Manager Nick Green, Grant School District 3 Superintendent Bret Uptomor and Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer during a meeting at the Grant County Regional Airport on April 2.

state over the land sale have focused on establishing the value of the Gleason Pool and city parkland, Green said. While the state has regulations limiting what they could pay for land, the sales money could be used as a match for future state grants.

John Day Mayor Ron Lundbom noted that any “kicker” provided by the state in the sale negotiations could be lost if a bond election fails. He called the negotiations “very complicated.”

Grant School District 3 Superintendent Bret Uptomor said the school board has ruled out seeking a bond to build a new high school. The board wants to use remodeling and infrastructure updates to keep existing buildings in good shape.

But speaking as an individual and as a school superintendent, Uptomor expressed support for a public pool in Grant County. He

noted that Ontario, where he worked in the past, closed its public pool six years ago, which was a major setback for the community.

Walker noted that when the hospital bond sunsets in 2021, taxpayers could pay a smaller bond for a pool and pay less taxes overall.

Spreading costs

One option raised as a way to increase revenue to meet annual operating costs was to expand the Parks & Rec district to include Mt. Vernon and Prairie City. Board member Lisa Weigum, however, said the Parks & Rec board was definitely opposed to that idea.

Green said, if the pool remains open after the 2020 season, the city would need to consider a local option levy to pay for operations and maintenance. City taxpayers would end up paying to run the pool, he said.

Lundbom expressed his concern that so many peo-

ple want a pool but John Day could end up paying for it. About 40 percent of the Gleason Pool use has been by people from outside the city who basically swim for free, he said.

The city also carried the burden for 911 dispatch and other services for too long, Lundbom said. Why is John Day responsible for providing a public pool for the rest of the county, he asked. It was time for the county to step up and support a new pool, he said.

Blue Mountain Hospital District board member Levi Manitsas said the board is discussing ways it can support a public pool, which provides a healthy activity. The hospital is one of the largest employers in the county, he said, and one option was to purchase annual pool passes for all of its employees.

Greater need

Walker said the pool

issue is not just about the swim team, instead providing a healthy environment for the entire community. Weigum agreed, noting that the Parks & Rec district offered programs for adults, including aerobics and lap swimming. Howard said plans were being made to expand pool hours into the evening to accommodate more adults.

Howard also said a public pool enables teaching a needed life skill — how to swim. Several audience members echoed that point, as did Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer, speaking as a stakeholder representing the county court. Weigum noted that Parks & Rec often waives fees for children who live outside the district and those in need.

A simple conceptual drawing of a six-lane outdoor pool with an attached gym featuring two basketball courts puzzled a woman in the audience. She said she thought the meeting was about a swimming pool.

Weigum explained that a shortage of gym space exists in the county, which impacts adults who want to walk in winter. Lundbom noted that Parks & Rec could make money selling gym space in winter. He added that he was the “last to cave” on the idea of building an indoor pool.

Walker pointed out that the only addition to the existing Gleason Pool facility in the conceptual drawing was a “party room,” which could be rented out. She also said the meeting was about a public pool, not a gym.

Palmer said public input over the pool's future seemed equally divided, with nothing in the middle. He encouraged the public to speak with county court members and provide more input on the matter.

Broadband promoters adjust to grant hurdles

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Leaders in the effort to improve internet access in Grant County have to be nimble on their feet as they vie for competitive grants and design networks that provide the best service for the public.

Last December, the Grant County Digital Network Coalition learned it had not been awarded a \$2.9 million Community Connect grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The coalition had hoped to leverage a \$1.8 million state appropriation it received in 2017 to begin running optical fiber cable south to Burns. The setback meant the coalition had to look for new grant opportunities.

Federal grants

The board agreed at their Feb. 19 meeting to revise their grant application plans, based on their consultants' advice about the criteria used to award grant application winners.

The federal ReConnect grant does not favor telecommunication routes through sparsely populated “frontier” areas that lack businesses, schools and health care facilities and requires pre-subscriptions by potential customers.

The Community Connect grant has less restrictive criteria.

The board agreed to swap the two federal grant applications and slightly



The Eagle/Richard Hanners
A Blue Mountain Telecommunication Services worker on a bucket truck helps run an optical fiber cable along South Canyon Boulevard from the John Day Fire Hall to the Grant County Education Service District building on April 3.

modify the project areas. The ReConnect grant application will now apply to the area along Highway 395 from the network's hub in the John Day Fire Hall to Strawberry Lane in Seneca, and the Community Connect application will apply to the area that includes most of Seneca and the route south to Burns.

Board members discussed how to line up enough people to pre-subscribe. Areas where the residents are served by Viasat are off limits to the coalition's pre-subscription efforts. Many of the large swaths of marked-off Viasat territory are ranches with only a single residence.

Oregon Telephone Corporation, the coalition's partner in the countywide broadband effort, is also seeking federal funding. The coalition board learned from Ortelco's Garrin Bott

on Jan. 5 that the company planned to apply for a ReConnect grant to help pay for running an optical fiber cable north from Mt. Vernon to Long Creek and possibly west to Monument.

Future funding

Sen. Jeff Merkley, who helped secure \$1.15 billion for rural broadband projects through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, commented in a March 5 press release on the need to ensure that funding

reaches the communities it is intended to help.

“Many Oregonians have expressed concerns that some of ReConnect's designs limit accessibility for more residential areas with fewer medical centers, businesses and educational facilities,” Merkley said in a letter to Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue.

The guidelines used to determine ReConnect grants make the program out of reach for many Americans in rural underserved or unserved areas, he said.

“The need for greater broadband accessibility is for both promoting economic growth and for expanding access to important services like health care and education,” Merkley said in his letter. “Access to high-speed internet, especially for rural communities, is crucial in connecting our constituents to the wealth of information and resources that remains critically underutilized in these areas.”

In 2018, Business Oregon funded seven broadband projects in under-

served rural areas through the Rural Broadband Capacity Pilot Program. The department received 25 applications totaling \$4.8 million in requests for the \$500,000 in available funding.

House Bill 2184, currently in committee, calls for lowering the surcharge on retail telecommunication sales for wireline telephone customers in Oregon from 8.5 percent to 7 percent but also applying the surcharge to wireless communication.

Up to \$10 million of the surcharge receipts would go into a new Broadband Fund that would promote broadband projects beginning in 2020. The Grant County Court agreed at its March 27 meeting to send a letter in support of HB 2184.

Senate Bill 904, introduced by Sen. Cliff Bentz at the request of the Grant County Digital Network Coalition, called for appropriating \$3 million from the general fund to support broadband infrastructure in Grant County. It has so far failed to move out of committee.

Small steps

Meanwhile, the coalition has been moving forward with small projects. The board approved a \$33,333 bid by Blue Mountain Telecom on Feb. 5 to run an optic fiber cable from the John Day Fire Hall to the Grant County Education Service District office.

The cable project was delayed, but crews began running cable April 2. The run is needed to provide internet access to 911 dispatch before they relocate from the city hall to the fire hall.

When the crew is finished, it will head to Seneca to run optical fiber from the school to the city hall building.

On March 26, the board approved a \$55,743 bid, also by Blue Mountain Telecom, to install an optic fiber cable from the fire hall to city hall. A large capacity cable will be run north to North Canyon Boulevard and First Street and then a smaller cable will continue to the People Mover facility, back to Highway 26 and then on to city hall.

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