

Airport bond defeat could foreshadow trouble for other measures down the pike

Cannon Beach rejects the bond

By Derrick DePledge
EO Media Group

Voters rejected a \$1.96 million bond measure in May that would have helped finance the expansion of Life Flight Network and other improvements at Astoria Regional Airport.

The bond failed by a slim, 146-vote margin in a special district election where voter turnout was a paltry 35 percent. But a closer look inside the vote tally by precinct showed a pattern that could foreshadow trouble for future bond measures, like money for a county jail.

Precincts in Astoria favored the airport bond, while Warrenton was divided. The rest of Clatsop County, outside pockets of Seaside, North Clatsop, Hamlet and Walluski, went against the bond.

The geographic divide could be important if the county seeks a bond to turn the North Coast Youth Correctional Facility in Warrenton into a larger county jail. County commissioners have ordered a study into whether the youth facility, which is closing because of state budget cuts, could be an alternative to the overcrowded 60-bed jail in Astoria.

The rejection of the airport bond by voters outside of Astoria suggests advocates for relocating the county jail would have to make a strong argument that a jail would benefit the entire county.

"People are concerned about the amount of taxes that they pay on their property. And I think that all bond measures, regardless of the benefit — for the most part — people are going to be skeptical," said Jim Knight, the executive director of the Port of Astoria, which backed the airport bond.

Trapped by infighting

Former Astoria Mayor Wilis Van Dusen and state Sen.



JOSHUA BESSE/EO MEDIA GROUP

Life Flight Network wanted financial help for a new hangar, while the other infrastructure improvements at the south end of the airport could have enabled future development at the regional hub.

Betsy Johnson, two of the most well-known politicians in the county, led a political action committee for the airport bond. But the vote was called on relatively short notice, the amount of the bond was reduced for technical reasons just weeks before the election, and the merits of the infrastructure investment became trapped within the bitter infighting at the Port.

Knight believes several factors doomed the vote, from the unexpected opposition from some on the Port Commission to the lack of a voters' pamphlet. He also thinks some voters in South County were apprehensive about making another financial commitment so soon after the \$99.7 million in bonds they approved last November to move three schools out of the tsunami inundation zone.

Port commissioners all said they supported Life Flight Network, but Commissioner Bill Hunsinger attacked the airport bond as a giveaway to special interests, while Commissioner Stephen Fulton, who was running for a second term in the May election, called it speculative development that should be rejected. Fulton and his slate of Port candidates lost the election, but they may have influenced the narrow 51 percent to 49 percent defeat of the bond.

"I don't think any of us were really prepared for the

negative position, or the anti-bond measure information that was being put out there," Knight said.

The airport bond and the Port Commission elections received extensive coverage in The Daily Astorian, but Knight and others believe a voters' pamphlet would have helped educate voters about the issues at stake. The county does not typically publish voters' pamphlets for special district elections because candidates have balked at paying fees for the service.

"In this particular case, I think the voters' pamphlet could have been one of the more helpful documents for the bond measure," Knight said.

Unity

Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer, who works at Lektro, the aircraft tug maker at the airport, and who is a former chairman of the Port's Airport Advisory Committee, said the lesson from the airport bond is unity.

Subversion from within the Port Commission, the mayor said, likely confused and distracted voters. He said county commissioners, if they decide to pursue a bond for a jail, will need to get fully behind a bond campaign.

"I think the real lesson here is the bond became an election issue more so than a bond issue," Balensifer said.

Sheila Roley, the superintendent of the Seaside School District, said she heard from people before the election who did not understand exactly why the Port was asking for the bond money.

Life Flight Network, which provides emergency medical flights, wanted financial help for a new hangar, while the other infrastructure improvements at the south end of the airport could have enabled future development at the regional hub. Taxpayers would have paid an estimated \$12.35 a year for property assessed at \$100,000 as the bond matured over four years.

"I did hear quite a few people mention their misunderstanding of what it was and why would we be voting for something that's going to benefit Astoria," Roley said.

Three of the four precincts in Seaside rejected the airport bond, as did precincts in Gearhart and Cannon Beach.

Roley said there is always a little bit of South County versus North County sentiment, but she believes the failure of the airport bond does not cloud a potential bond for a jail. She said it is easier for voters to see how a jail would benefit the entire county.

"I think that was fairly issue specific," she said of the May vote.

'Messaging is really important'

Clatsop County could place a bond for a jail on the ballot as soon as next year, when there are primary and general elections that typically draw more voter interest.

Voters in May 2012 turned down a \$14 million bond measure to expand the jail in Astoria. The measure failed 56 percent to 44 percent despite evidence of jail overcrowding and appeals from law enforcement, led by Sheriff Tom Bergin. Voter turnout was 52.6 percent, significantly higher than the 35 percent for the airport bond in May.

Stevens named to Port of Astoria Commission

Retired Coast Guard captain fills vacant seat

By Edward Stratton
EO Media Group

ASTORIA — The Port of Astoria Commission on Tuesday unanimously appointed retired U.S. Coast Guard Capt. Robert Stevens of Warrenton to fill the vacancy left by Robert Mushen, who resigned earlier this month because of medical issues.

Stevens, a veteran of 34 years in the U.S. Coast Guard and Navy and a merchant marine, said he would offer calm, quiet confidence to help the Port promote growth and stay fiscally responsible.

"The Port's received a lot of criticism, some of it justified," he said during introductions of the seven hopefuls for Mushen's seat. "I'm here to make this a professional, deliberative body, the way that democracy is envisioned, and I know that several of you believe the same thing."

He was joined in interviews Tuesday by former commission candidate Pat O'Grady, former budget committee

Chairman John Lansing, land use planner Pamela Wev, former Yamhill County Commissioner Robert Johnstone, South County developer Russ Earl and retired inventor Ronald Meyer.

Stevens, a licensed captain of vessels large and small who recently retired from teaching and evaluating captains of offshore platforms in emergency management, ran Port Commissioner James Campbell's successful re-election campaign against fellow incumbent Stephen Fulton in May's special districts election. He said he was encouraged by others to apply for Mushen's seat and felt he had something to offer the Port.

Stevens' take

Stevens fielded questions Tuesday from Port commissioners on several of the agency's big-ticket issues.

A bond measure to fund infrastructure improvements at the Astoria Regional Airport narrowly failed in May's special districts election. Asked by Commissioner Dirk



Robert Stevens

Rohne about his outlook at the airport, Stevens said it was a shame the ballot measure failed, but that the Port can take baby steps to improve the facility, help medevac service Life Flight find a better location and attract more business.

"I would be supportive of maybe looking at going to the voters again with a bond measure and doing a better job of selling it," he said. "I'd be welcome to help do that."

Most of the people who voted the bond down were in South County, he said, and he'd be willing to stump for the project on behalf of the Port.

Stevens said he wants to help get government support on big issues such as the \$13.7 million difference between the Port's and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's estimates on damage from the December 2015 storms, and in dealing with stormwater-treatment requirements.

The Port Commission recently voted to send a letter to

the Local Grill & Scoop

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