

~ Letters to the Editor ~

The Heppner Gazette Times will print all letters to the Editor with the following criteria met: letters submitted to the newspaper will need to have the name of the sender along with a legible signature. We are also requesting that you provide your address and a phone number where you can be reached. The address and phone number will only be used for verification and will not be printed in the newspaper. Letters may not be libelous. The GT reserves the right to edit. The GT is not responsible for accuracy of statements made in letters. Any letters expressing thanks will be placed in the classifieds under "Card of Thanks" at a cost of \$10.

Here's what happened

Guest Editorial

By Ed Glenn, Mayor of Boardman

We are so familiar with un-kept political promises that many of us have simply become "disconnected" from our government. But once in a while the people should have an opportunity to hold our government's feet to the fire to turn promises into action.

That's the way it is with the initiative to share the Findley Buttes License Fees in Morrow County (commonly called "tippage" fees) with its five communities. Here's what happened:

The Unkept Political Promise

In 1987, Tidewater Barge Lines proposed a Regional Landfill in Morrow County. The County adopted an enabling ordinance permitting licensing of a Regional Landfill and granted a license to Tidewater to build what has become known as Findley Buttes Landfill.

But some citizens were fearful that Morrow County would be known as a metropolitan garbage dump and that would hinder future economic growth. They proposed an ordinance by initiative that would require any Regional Landfill license to be approved by the voters, only at a general election and only if a majority of all registered voters (not just a majority of those voting) approved.

That initiative was seen as a virtual veto of any licensing agreement the County Court would negotiate and both Tidewater and members of the County Court actively campaigned against the initiative. County officials extolled the benefits of increased employment, increased tax revenues, and made assurances that the license fees would be used for the benefit of the five Morrow County communities. Based certainly in part on those assurances, the voters soundly defeated the initiative.

By 1992, construction at Findley Buttes was complete and the first full year of operation resulted in license fees paid to Morrow County of about \$137,000. In early 1993, the Morrow County Court made good on its promise and adopted a resolution providing for allocation of nearly all of the license fees to special projects in its five communities.

But just five months later, before any funds could be distributed, the County Court suspended that allocation resolution and instead allocated all of the license fees to "back-fill" the County's General Fund. That suspension has never been changed nor has the original allocation resolution been put into operation.

Findley Buttes Landfill has become one of Morrow County's more successful businesses and over the years the license fee revenues have grown to a little more than \$1 million per year. While some of that growth in revenue has been used to continue back-filling the General Fund, the County has been reluctant to share the increased revenue with its communities but rather has simply allowed it to accumulate in a form of "savings account" which now amounts to just over \$1 million.

Morrow County Mayors and Managers

A year ago, the mayors and managers of the five Morrow County Cities (acting as individuals without any formal organization nor specific authority from their respective cities) began meeting on a monthly schedule to discuss common problems and potential concerted action toward solutions. While several subjects have been discussed, Findley Buttes license fee distribution has been a major and repeated topic.

With unusual agreement among them (especially for Morrow County communities) the Mayors and Managers engaged in negotiations with members of the Morrow County Court, both private and public, for a new distribution scheme for Findley Buttes license fees. Firm in our goals, yet flexible in compromise, we found the County Court unwilling to budge from its position that the license fees belonged to the County and that the distribution to the communities, if any, would remain in the absolute control of the County.

For the benefit of their respective communities, the Mayor's and Manager's goals are:

1. A relatively reliable revenue stream from year-to-year. In setting community priorities, it is essential to know if and approximately how much revenue will be available in future

years.

2. The ability to design community distribution processes unique to the needs of the community. The five communities are so different in population, community needs and resources that a one-size-fits-all process does not meet the needs of any community.

3. The flexibility to fund multi-community projects on a benefits basis. Many projects benefit different communities in different ways and each should be able to determine funding shares based on the community sense of benefit and priority.

The Defective Present Process

It is true that the County has sponsored a community grant program since 1997 and it claims about \$850,000 has been awarded to community projects in the past 10 years. However, there's a big difference between "awards" and actual funding. For example, \$135,000 was "awarded" in FY 2007, but only \$81,686 was actually dispersed. Some awards are carried over to the following year. For example at least \$33,950 of the FY 2007 awards have been funded in FY 2008.

But here's the catch. The FY 2008 budget does not make provision for FY 2007 awards carried over, and if those awards are paid out of the FY 2008 budget (which has been the practice in the past), some of the FY 2008 awards cannot be funded.

There has been no reliability in the amount of funding made available for community grant awards. The budgets from 1998 through 2008 have ranged from a low of \$46,450 to \$235,000 in 2008.

What's worse, the process for grant awards excludes many applications that the mayors and managers would like to see considered. The number of deficiencies in the single county-wide program is too long to enumerate here except to say that it is a county wide committee that sets priorities of projects from throughout the county. That means that each grant application not only competes with every other grant from the same community but every application from every other community as well.

That process has led to some strange results. Some examples: In 1998 and 1999 no projects identified with Lexington were awarded out of more than \$200,000 allocated for the two years. In 2000 and 2005 no projects identified with Irrigon (the most populous community in the County) were funded. It is true that over the years, community grants have been awarded on a generally fair basis, but the lack of reliability from year to year makes each annual advisory committee meeting a literal free-for-all.

The Mayors and Managers Initiative

Faced with the lack of any indication that the County Court would even negotiate toward the Mayor's and Manager's goals, the present initiative was filed with sufficient voter signatures to put the issue on the ballot for a special election in March. In summary, the initiative proposes enactment of a County ordinance that would require the County to distribute 25% of the license fees to the cities in 2009, 50% in 2010 and 75% in 2011 and years thereafter. The amount to be distributed would be divided in half; with one-half distributed equally among the five cities and the other half divided among the cities proportional to the number of registered voters in their respective precincts.

The Mayors and Managers intend that this distribution replace the present process of distribution to community organizations and they are committed to development of their own process based on their respective communities' unique needs and sense of priorities. Those plans will have to await City Council action and cannot now be reported with any accuracy. The City of Heppner has a draft plan, the City of Boardman has not considered the issue. Who knows, maybe the Boardman Council will simply give their share right back to the County in order to "keep it whole."

The Objections

While the advantages of passing the initiative ordinance should be obvious, several objections have been voiced. At a packed County Court meeting on the matter, farmers from the far reaches of the County worried that the County road fund would suffer. What they didn't know, and the County Court did not mention, is that Morrow County levies a special road fund tax levy (incorporated in its total tax levy) that is limited in use for County roads. Moreover, state law severely restricts transfers from the General Fund to the Road Fund. Records indicate that only once in the past five years has such a transfer been made, perhaps in violation that law.

County officials cling to the language in the enabling ordinance that provides for the license fees to be de-

posited to the General Fund. But that's not at all what they do. License fees are deposited to a Findley Buttes License Fund instead and from there some funds are transferred to other funds (such as the County Fair Fund) by-passing the General Fund altogether. Other expenditures are made directly from the License Fund such as expenditures to provide office space and support in Heppner for the OSU extension agent.

Much has been said about the Cities' "entitlement" to a share of the license fees but no one seems concerned about the "entitlement" of a share to the County Fair, the government trapper, the watermaster, the Soil and Water Conservation service, the extension service office and other programs repeatedly funded from the License Fee Fund.

Often we have heard that if the license fees are distributed to the Cities, the County will have to cut services. We've heard that song and dance before and it has not come to pass. Indeed, the allocation to the communities was increased in 2008 by \$100,000 over 2007; in the words of one County official "because we had the money and didn't need it." Because the savings account, in the form of year-to-year ending fund balance in the License Fee Fund, has increase nearly \$200,000 per year in recent years, the Mayors and Managers believe that has been the case for years.

By 2011 when the phase-in proposed in the initiative reaches 75%, Morrow County will begin to collect additional property taxes on industrial properties coming out of Free Enterprise Zone exemption. Those boosts in other resources can be immense from just the developments now on the ground or under construction: PGE's Coyote Springs II, Pacific Ethanol, RDO/Calbee Foods, the Collins Co. sawmill and dry kiln/planner mill, ReKlaim and others. On the drawing board, PGE plans extensive new pollution control equipment and the speedway is due for some construction this spring. All except one of these multi-million dollar industrial developments are outside any City limits and will not contribute to municipal tax revenues.

Some folks have complained that the distribution formula favors South County cities and that voter registration numbers are not an accurate count of population. On both counts they may have a point. But the formula is very nearly the same as the County adopted back in 1993, except the top bracket share is 75% of the revenue rather than 90% as provided in that 1993 Resolution.

Others have worried that rural residents will not get a fair shake from city governments. (It seems strange that knowledgeable people claim Morrow County population is 60% rural while only 40% live in one of Morrow County's cities - quite the opposite is true.) Such worries are not well founded, since 100% of Morrow County residents identify with one community or another, if for no reason other than post office addresses. Rural residents share in much of the social and political fabric of their nearest community. They travel City streets to shop in City shops, they join community based organizations and attend community churches all of which will benefit from community based distributions of license fee revenues.

The Simple Bottom Line

While the debate may rage on until ballots are returned on March 11, the bottom line is simply this: Which system can best serve all the people of Morrow County best: the present system of uncertainty in amount, the luck of the draw before a county-wide priority committee, an ever increasing savings account and continued General Fund back-fill at a time of increasing other resources; or local community programs providing locally determined priorities with some certainty over future funding sources?

[Ed Glenn is Mayor of the City of Boardman and has served as the spokesman for the Morrow County Mayors and Managers. He can be reached at flyfisherman@windwave.org. Glenn, Mayor Val Doherty of Lexington and County Judge Terry Tallman will discuss the initiative ordinance at the Boardman Chamber of Commerce monthly luncheon at noon, February 20, and again at a town-hall meeting sponsored by the Irrigon Chamber of Commerce at 7:00 p.m. on February 22, at Stokes Landing Senior Center.]

Morrow County Parks meeting to be held

The Morrow County Parks meeting will be held Thursday, February 21, at 7 p.m. at the Columbia Basin Electric Co-Op conference room at 171 Linden Way in Heppner. The public is invited.

For more information call Betty Gray at 989-9500.

Senior Center Menu

Hope/Valby/All Saints Church members will be serving lunch on Wednesday, February 20. The menu will meatloaf, mashed potatoes with brown gravy, spinach, fruit juice, hot rolls, and strawberries with ice cream.

Correction

In the story *Proposed wind farm to be located in Morrow and Gilliam Counties*, in the February 6 edition of the Heppner Gazette-Times, the story should have read: "The proposed facility would consist of approximately 303 wind turbines and would have a combined peak generating capacity of up to 909 megawatts. The Heppner Gazette-Times regrets the error."

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