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GOAL 9 analysis shows need for more employment lands throughout South Morrow

By Andrea Di Salvo
 The recent Goal 9 buildable lands analysis conducted for the three communities of the Willow Creek Valley wrapped up last month. Morrow County Planner Tamra Mabbott and the team from Points Consulting appeared before the Morrow County Board of Commissioners June 21 to provide an update on the team's findings.

Mabbott said she approached the cities of South Morrow County about a year ago and told them the county had just finished the buildable lands inventory for housing and asked if they would like the same thing done for employment lands. Employment lands are places people work, commercial or industrial property. Oregon Statewide Planning Program has 17 planning goals; Goal 9 is economic development.

With that in mind, Morrow County Planning secured a technical assistance grant from the Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD), aiming to support the economic development and employment opportunities in the Willow Creek Valley. The contract for the project was awarded to Points Consulting in July 2022.

Points Consulting project assistant Madeline Bowen was at the meeting via Zoom, along with economist Pedro Jimenez, and senior planner Ryan Hughes from Nexus Planning Services.

One crucial aspect of the project involved analyzing the existing commercial and industrial land supplies in each community.

Hughes's role was to analyze the existing commercial and industrial land supplies in each community. The team then looked at constraints such as wetlands and flood plains, slopes, ownership.

"That would give us our net supply, and from there we're looking at both vacant and redevelopable lands that would suggest how much is available for future development," said Hughes.

Hughes added that flood plains are a "significant" constraint when it comes to development along the Willow Creek Valley.

For instance, Hughes said, in Heppner they started with a gross of roughly 290 acres of employment land, but ended with a net of only 49.6 acres.

"In this case, it really just limits what can be done

for the future, so we see that the supply is quite limited there," he said.

The situation was similar in Ione, where analysis showed zero available industrial acres even though they began analysis with roughly 64 gross acres. In Lexington, there were only about two good-sized industrial plots available.

"It kind of gives us a sense that, overall, we're fairly limited in what can be done, and when we look at future opportunities, we want to see that there's vacant acreage that a potential business or an investor could come in and provide additional employment use."

Population projections were also taken into account during the assessment.

"Historically, the Willow Creek Valley has done fairly well," Bowen said.

While the Willow Creek Valley experienced a slight population drop during the COVID-19 pandemic, as did many areas, future projections indicate a steady population growth. The exception is Lexington, which is expected to see a very slight decline.

Despite this, the area has shown strong employment growth over the past decade, outpacing both the state and national averages—40 percent higher than the national average, in fact.

Factors such as the arrival of large employers like Amazon and the support of the Columbia River Enterprise Zone have contributed to this growth, Bowen said. She said employment growth is projected to continue, though it may not be as significant as in previous years.

Overall, there are currently 704 jobs in the Wil-

low Creek Valley. Jimenez said those are expected to increase 0.4 percent over the next 10 years to 707 jobs, followed by a decline down to 702 jobs, for an overall decline of 0.3 percent over 20 years.

The county has also experienced significant growth in wages, increasing 125 percent in 11 years.

"It's worth knowing that these job numbers are by place of work rather than by place of residence," said Jimenez. "This means that the actual number of employed persons in each WCV is higher than the numbers shown, but many of these workers currently out-commute from their cities to go to work."

He also said the projections were assuming a status quo, with no changes to the urban growth boundary or new investments by the town or cities.

"The cities in the WCV aren't necessarily predestined to this," he said. "These numbers can change if those assumptions I mentioned before change as well."

Based on his research, Jimenez said the Willow Creek Valley would probably see a 5.2-acre demand for industrial acreage, with a four-percent demand for commercial acres. Of the three communities, Heppner is the one that will likely have the greatest need for industrial acres with a demand for 1.8 acres by 2043, while Ione will probably have the greatest need for commercial land, at 2.6 acres.

However, the findings of the assessment revealed a shortage of both medium and large industrial sites in the Willow Creek Valley,

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