

Council rezones McNary land to allow housing development

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

The Umatilla City Council agreed to rezone a portion of McNary from commercial to residential after a developer made concessions in the design of a proposed subdivision.

Fastrack Inc. owner Arnie Wick first approached the council in March, asking for the entire 8.5 acre property across from the Quality Inn to be rezoned from commercial to residential. He planned to build 38 homes on 8,500-square-foot lots valued at \$130,000 to \$160,000 each.

At the time some city councilors called McNary a “bedroom community” and said the new housing could spur growth, while others said they were hesitant to get rid of most of McNary’s buildable commercial property. There were also concerns that the lots were too small and the houses would be sandwiched together.

In April, after two meetings on the subject, the council voted unanimously to reject the request for a zoning change.

Wick’s revised proposal before the council on Tuesday would expand the lots to 10,000 square feet and leave the eight lots facing Willamette Avenue zoned for commercial use, resulting in a housing development with 24 new homes paired with sizable yards.

“We’re capable of providing whatever it is the community needs and what everyone feels good about,” Wick said. “It’s better these things are discussed.”

Councilor Mary Dedrick said she wasn’t sure that people looking for higher-end homes would be interested in a home next to a mini-mart and said she would like to see the whole property zoned residential now that Wick had agreed to build on larger lots.

Wick said the strip of commercial property along Willamette Avenue could always be turned into a residential zone later if the council wanted to revisit it, but approving his request for a rezoning of the rest of the property would let him get started.

“This decision tonight is going to keep Arnie going,” City Manager Russ Pelleberg told the council. “I think he’s been held up long enough.”

The council agreed, voting 5-0 to direct the planning department to draw up an official ordinance rezoning most of the property to residential.

Property dispute

On Tuesday the council also heard an appeal for a property dispute between two Umatilla landowners on Riverside Avenue, but decided to put off a decision until Dec. 20 to give councilors time to digest the extensive testimony they heard from both parties and their attorneys.

Tom and Janis Carey applied to the city this summer for a replat of their property



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

The Umatilla City Council is looking for input on whether to rezone areas of the McNary subdivision from commercial to residential to allow a new housing development.

that would erase a 20-foot-wide easement on their land that currently allows the neighboring property owners vehicle access to the shop at the back of their property. City planner Bill Searles granted the request.

Neighbors Teri and Kevin Petersen appealed the decision to the city’s planning commission, which reversed it. The Careys are asking the city council to uphold Searles’ original decision.

Under Oregon law city staff can erase a public easement during the replatting process but not a private one. A central question in the case is whether the easement, which is merely marked “access easement” on the plat, is public or private.

100 year milestone

This week marked the 100-year anniversary of one of the city of Umatilla’s most famous events, a political coup known as the Petticoat Revolution that made national headlines.

It was four years before the 19th Amendment would guarantee women the right to vote, but in Oregon that right had already been extended to them. Fed up with the way the men were running the town, on Dec. 5, 1916, the women of Umatilla quietly staged a write-in campaign against their husbands.

When the votes were counted and recounted, Laura Starcher had beaten her husband Mayor E.E. Starcher by 26 votes in a town of 198 residents. She was joined by female city councilors Anna Means, Florence Brownell, Stella Paulu and Gladys Spinning (two male city councilors who had not been up for re-election retained their seats) along with city recorder Bertha Cheney.

Some newspapers of the time mistakenly called Starcher the country’s first female mayor, but Argonia, Kansas, had a female mayor in 1887 and the town of Kanab, Utah, elected a female mayor and all-female town council in 1912 after no men expressed interest in running.

According to the Oregon History Project, after Umatilla’s Petticoat Revolution “the council improved water and electrical services, approved funds for street and sidewalk projects, and organized city cleanup weeks. Additional accomplish-

ments included new railroad crossing signs, the founding of a town library, replacement of the city’s American flags, institution of monthly garbage collection, planning for future community projects, and the appointment of a city health official during a 1918 smallpox epidemic.”

Starcher resigned from her post a year early due to health reasons and was succeeded by two more female mayors.

Umatilla continues its century-old history of female city councilors today with Mary Dedrick and Sharon Farnsworth. Dedrick said Tuesday after the council meeting that she enjoyed being a part of that tradition. “Women rule!” she said, summing up her feelings on the subject.

Contact Jade McDowell at j 541-564-4536.

Umatilla County, union strike new labor deal

By **PHIL WRIGHT**
Staff Writer

After seven months of negotiations, Umatilla County and members of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees agreed on a labor contract.

The county board of commissioners on Wednesday, Dec. 7, voted 2-0 to ratify the three-year deal that includes cost of living increases of 2 percent each year for the 110 members in the local. The contract is effective retroactively to July 1, 2016 and runs through June 30, 2019.

Bargaining began May 9. Seth Moore was the AFSCME representative at the table for the employees and took to Facebook to provide updates on the negotiations. He also used those updates to criticize the county’s team for a lack of readiness and dragging out the process. On Aug. 31, both teams asked for a mediator to step in and help and Commissioner George Murdock reported in October that negotiations broke down.

Commissioner Larry Givens said pay was

the hurdle that caused the need for outside help. The union wanted more than the county could afford, he said, and both sides were prepared to walk out of the talks.

Moore agreed pay was an issue. He said the union would like to see Umatilla County provide pay comparable to counties with similar populations, such as Polk, Benton and Coos counties. Moore called the contract a compromise, but one the members ratified.

County commissioners in July 2015 gave county-wide elected officials a cost-of-living increase of 3 percent and increased their own pay 7.5 percent, making their salary \$86,273 a year. The increases made the commissioner pay comparable to what Benton County pays commissioners at the top of its scale and about \$20,000 more than what Polk and Klamath counties pay theirs.

Labor negotiations al-

ways give employees and management angst, Givens said, and agreeing on a new contract is a relief. Commissioner Bill Elfving said if neither side gets everything it wanted, it’s probably a good deal.

“I think that’s probably the case here,” he said.

The matter of insurance, though, is going to bring both sides back to the bargaining table in 2017. The county’s carrier, LifeWise Health Plan of Oregon, is pulling out of the state’s insurance market. Jennifer Blake, the county’s human resources director, said there are at least five insurance companies the county can turn to, and staff are working on seeking bids as soon as possible.

Robert Pahl, the county’s chief financial officer, added the county is facing a “substantial increase” in the cost of health insurance of at least 15 percent.



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