

City council reverses course on proposal for mini-storage facility

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

A local developer left the Hermiston City Council meeting empty-handed last week after expecting the council to rezone property he planned to use for mini-storage.

"I wish I had understood the process better," Steve Richards of Eastern Oregon Development told the council after they voted down the ordinance on Nov. 12. "I thought it had already passed."

While the council had voted in favor of the rezone at their Oct. 28 meeting, the vote was a nonbinding oral agreement directing staff to draft the proper ordinance for approval at its next meeting.

Instead, the addition of two previously absent councilors and one flipped vote caused the ordinance to fail 5-3 on Tuesday.

The 9-acre property in question stretches from Highway 395 to Southeast Fourth Street on the north side of Roger's Toyota. It's zoned for commercial use, but Richards needed a "neighborhood commercial overlay" added in order to build a storage facility similar to the Highland Mini Storage project he opened last year.

The project would have been built on the Fourth Street side of the property, keeping the 4 acres closest to the highway open for development. But the planning commission recommended against the rezone, noting the city had hoped to put in a street on one side of the property sometime in the future, increasing access off Highway 395 to possibly attract a large retailer.

During their Oct. 28 meeting, councilors were persuaded to go against the planning commission's recommendation after listening to a presentation by Richards noting the inadequate number of storage units in town, and an easement and other factors that made the property difficult to develop for retail.

At that meeting councilors Doug Primmer, Doug Smith, Manuel Gutierrez



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

A "For Sale" sign sits at the narrow entrance off Highway 395 to a 9-acre property a developer would like to use for storage units.

and Rod Hardin voted in favor of the rezone while Jackie Myers and Roy Barron voted against the proposal.

On Tuesday, councilor John Kirwan, who was absent at the previous meeting, reminisced about his first visit to Hermiston as a teenager in 1990, when he drove through empty property that later became the location of Home Depot.

"Sometime in the past, the council had the forethought to plan for the future," he said.

Kirwan said if the council allowed storage units on its largest developable site along the main thoroughfare through town, they could be preventing the next Home Depot-type development.

Smith disagreed, noting storage units would not be very hard to dismantle if, sometime in the future, a big box store with deep pockets decided it wanted the property.

Primmer also voiced his support for the project, stating if they didn't approve the rezone, Richards would still be free to build other allowable projects in the zone that

weren't a big box store or restaurant.

"We've got a piece of property, we've got an interested party, we've got a potential development, and nothing on the horizon for that piece of property," he said.

In the end, however, Smith, Primmer and Gutierrez were the only ones who voted in favor of the rezone, while Hardin, Barron, Myers, Kirwan and Lori Davis voted against the proposal.

Richards told the council after the vote he had thought Tuesday's meeting was merely a formality, and that the council had already approved the project.

He felt it was unfair his time was limited during his presentation on Oct. 28, and that he didn't have any chance to make his case to Kirwan and Davis or answer any of the concerns Kirwan brought up.

"You have two councilors voting who didn't see the presentation," he said.

Work session with Rep. Greg Smith

Prior to the council's regular meeting, they held an hourlong work session with

Rep. Greg Smith, who provided updates and answered questions about the Oregon Legislature.

He also answered a question from Gutierrez that he's been asked more than once lately: whether he plans to run for Congressman Greg Walden's seat.

Smith said Walden's retirement announcement came as a surprise to everyone, including him, and he was flattered Gutierrez would think of him. He had looked at the numbers and there was "definitely" a path to victory, he said, but there was another problem: "I'm too old," he said.

At 51, he might not seem that old, but Smith said that in Washington, D.C., it takes 10 years to get enough seniority for a decent committee assignment, let alone the kind of power Walden wields as top Republican on the Energy and Commerce Committee.

"I would need 20 years to get where Walden is," he said. "As much as I love serving, I'm not sure I have 20 more years in me."

He said as much as he respects Rep. Cliff Bentz, who has thrown his hat into the ring at age 67, the district would be better served by electing someone who was closer to age 45.

One question on the forefront of the council's mind Tuesday was whether the Democrats' efforts to pass a cap-and-trade carbon tax in Oregon will return in the 2020 legislative session.

"I'm hearing a lot of talk, but I'm not seeing the dominoes lining up to back that up," Smith responded.

He said despite chatter to the contrary, he thought it would likely be postponed until the longer 2021 session. Smith said proponents of the bill put forward last session didn't understand the devastating effects

it would have on many of the his district's largest employers.

"I can't imagine a compromise that would move me to vote for it," he said.

The council also asked about how the Legislature plans to address the Public Employee Retirement System, which continues to drain budgets for cities, schools and other local governments. Smith said the issue at hand with PERS is that while the Legislature is powerful, one thing it doesn't have the power to do is break a contract.

The extremely generous deal with retirees in the 1980s, when Smith was only in sixth grade, might have been a mistake, he said, but the state can't go back on its word now.

"This might be the reason my Millennial generation is mad about the deal struck by the Boomer generation," councilor Roy Barron responded, adding that the blame is "on the people who made the deal, not the people receiving benefits."

Mayor David Drotzmann said it was frustrating PERS "has been eating our lunch for years" and yet state rules capping property tax rates limits cities' ability to raise money to pay for it — unlike the state, which can just pass another tax to pay for things.

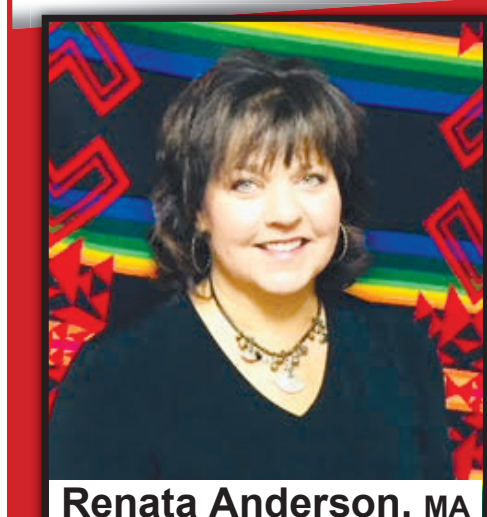
"I'd like for local government to be part of the discussion," he said. "You've got the option to go out and raise revenue. We don't."

Smith agreed that cities got "thrown under the bus" during discussions of PERS reform. He said that there are people in the Legislature with a wide variety of expertise, from teaching to nursing, but there are "very few people in the Legislature who know how to read an amortization chart."

"They're good folks, they just don't understand," he said.



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