

Sales tax overwhelmingly turned down in survey

Poll asks businesses if center should expand

By Katherine Lacaze
Seaside Signal

A majority of Seaside Chamber of Commerce and Seaside Downtown Development Association members do not support a local tax on food and retail sales to fund a Seaside Civic and Convention Center expansion, and some don't support the \$25 million expansion at all, according to a survey.

The Seaside Civic and Convention Center staff recently conducted a survey among 60 association members and 101 chamber members. Of the 161 respondents from both organizations, 85 percent said they do not support the creation of a business improvement district, or sales tax, on food and retail sales, one of three funding sources suggested in a study by C.H. Johnson Consulting completed last year. Seven percent said they would support a sales tax and 8 percent said they might support it.

The second question on the survey asked if respondents support increasing the transient room tax, or lodging/bed tax, as a funding source. Of the 161 respondents, 57 percent said no, 28 percent said yes and 15 percent said maybe.

When it came to the third funding option, the development of a countywide alliance with Astoria, Cannon Beach and Seaside, 50 percent said no, 33 percent said yes and 17 percent said maybe.

Finally, respondents were asked, all funding sources and costs aside, if they still supported the idea of expanding the convention center. Forty-four percent of respondents said no, 26 percent said yes, 6 percent said they were not sure and 24 percent said maybe.

"I was surprised," said Russ Vandenberg, general manager of the convention center. "I had not anticipated that 44 percent would not support an expansion at all."

The survey was conducted following two presentations Vandenberg made

to the Seaside Chamber of Commerce and the Seaside Downtown Development Association. In those presentations, he outlined the three options for financing the convention center expansion as well as a \$6 million, multi-level parking structure. The monthly payment required to retire the \$31 million debt would be \$220,000 a month for 30 years.

The survey also included a comment section, and Vandenberg said they received numerous comments. The biggest takeaway from the comments, which were not available yet, Vandenberg said, was that "this town doesn't want any sales tax."

"They thought it would harm their business, or people would travel outside (the city) to shop," he said.

Other comments suggested the town does not have the infrastructure, such as parking and roads, to handle a significant increase in visitors in the downtown area. According to the survey, the expansion would allow the convention

center to bring groups of 500 to 600 to town.

Some people indicated they simply like Seaside's small-town feel and believe the expansion might harm that, Vandenberg said.

The construction alone would take about a year, and some of the chamber and association members expressed fear about how that might negatively impact their businesses.

"They like things the way they are," Vandenberg said.

The Seaside Downtown Development Association Board has already voted to oppose a sales tax, according to Tita Montero, SDDA executive director.

A link to the survey results was sent to both the chamber and association. The expansion committee will discuss the results before bringing recommendations to the Seaside Civic and Convention Center Commission. Sometime in the next few months, the commission will bring a final recommendation before Seaside City Council to consider.

Steer a straight course



KATHERINE LACAZE PHOTO

Frank Rendon, owner of Legendary Longhorns out of Sweet Home, sits atop his celebrity steer, Showgun, outside of the Seaside Civic and Convention Center. Rendon and his right-hand man Justin Wambach (not pictured) were in town with their steers, to promote Legendary Longhorns at the Oregon Festival & Events Conference hosted at the convention center last weekend. Rendon and Wambach take the steers to rodeos, fairs and other events across Oregon and Washington.

Timber project raises concerns about public process

Local agencies offer help to develop a management plan for the city's watershed

By Katherine Lacaze
Seaside Signal

The city is moving ahead with a timber harvesting project on its property in the Necanicum Watershed with little input from the Necanicum Watershed Council, North Coast Land Conservancy, and the public.

Despite a request by the land conservancy that the city temporarily halt its harvest to discuss harvesting alternatives, the Seaside City Council decided at its Feb. 23 meeting to honor its contract and continue the harvest.

"We're already in mid-stream," said Councilor Dana Phillips.

The city is clear-cutting about 60 acres of timber from its South Fork Necanicum Watershed property. The timber sale proceeds will be used to acquire more watershed property, according to city staff.

Logging crews have finished about 24 acres, and Public Works Director Neal Wallace told the council there would be costs associated with not moving forward. The city invested about \$12,000 in seedlings to replant in the clear-cut areas, and the logging crew also expects a certain volume of trees as part of its payment.

"If we put this on hold for right now, this job is pretty much done," Wallace said. The logging company, Berlog, of Clatskanie, and forester Mark Dreyer, owner of Lone Cedar Consulting and the city's consulting forester since 2006, would not wait a month while a discussion occurred, Wallace said.

Project concerns

At the council's meeting Feb. 9, the Necanicum Watershed Council also asked the City Council to reconsider approving the project. Melyssa Graeper, coordinator for the council, read a letter from the organization.

Noting that the watershed council has contributed over \$2 million in conservation funds to the community to address environmental and other issues, the letter expressed concern that the city, "a designated 'Tree City, USA,' is quickly moving ahead on a timber harvest in the watershed with little public process, including allowing the watershed council to provide

the input it was asked for."

The project was listed on the agenda for the Dec. 8 City Council meeting under new business and solely as a presentation by Wallace. After a roughly 10-minute presentation, which included comments from Dreyer, the board voted unanimously to approve taking the project to bid. The project was not taken to bid, however. Administrative Assistant Kim Jordan said the motion was misstated, and the City Council "knew at that meeting there was not going to be a bid."

Rather, Jordan said, the council meant to only approve the project. Councilor Don Johnson, who made the motion, agreed that the council "intended" to authorize city staff to proceed with the project.

'If we put this on hold for right now, this job is pretty much done'

Public Works Director
Neal Wallace

If the project had gone to bid, it would have been proposed by resolution, which would have required a public comment period.

When asked why the project did not have to go to bid, Wallace responded, "When we hired the forest manager we turned over the operation to him.

"He reviews the logger's information and makes the decision/recommendation on behalf of the city," Wallace said. "The council approved the forester's recommendation."

There is no record of the council approving the recommendation to hire Berlog; only Dreyer's initial description of the project is on the record.

In addition, the public was not given an opportunity at the December meeting to comment on the project before the motion was approved.

"It's disappointing," Graeper said. "It feels like they're not being transparent when they should be or could be."

Wallace planned to meet with the Necanicum Watershed Council in January to discuss the project but did not because a personal matter prevented him from doing so. The watershed council discussed the project on its own. Regardless, Graeper said, it would have been too late to offer input because the city already had approved the project and signed a contract.

"We weren't offered the opportunity to respond before decisions were made," she said.

The North Coast Land Conservancy was not offered the opportunity either, Executive Director Katie Voelke said.

"When we heard of the plan, we approached the city to offer our services," she said, adding that she learned of the project from a January newspaper article.

"Watershed-based land acquisition is the charitable service that we provide as a land trust," Voelke said. If the city creates a stewardship plan, it's possible to receive grants to purchase more land, she added.

Graeper said the situation has raised some questions about the public process regarding city projects and where there is room in the system for feedback.

"Moving forward I want to understand the city's process and be a part of it," she said.

The watershed council members decided unanimously at their January meeting that they "opposed the city's intent to harvest its watershed," Graeper said.

According to the watershed council, the harvest was not the city's only option to bring in revenue to purchase land; the council suggested other options such as grants, carbon credits, increasing the transient lodging tax, increasing water rates or a bond measure.

The watershed council asked why the city should own more land if it isn't going to manage its municipal water supply watershed any differently than what's minimally required by law under the Forest Practices Act.

"The city has something special in their ownership of the South Fork Necanicum watershed," the letter stated. "When the benefits are so minimal, and risk so great, it makes good sense to slow down and carefully plan out your management strategy."

Protecting the watershed

The watershed council also asked the City Council to revisit its forest management plan. At the December City Council meeting, when Councilor Don Johnson asked if the timber harvest fits within the forest management plan, Wallace said the plan was "very loosely put together" and only existed to manage the watershed and water quality and production.

Wallace said later he was referring to the water con-

servation and management plan because he and several other city staff members were not aware a forest, or rather timber, management plan existed until Wallace searched the archives recently. The city's timber management plan has not been updated since 1983.

The watershed council's letter admonished the city for its lack of attention to the management plan. It should not be a "one-time thought," but a living plan with specific short-term activities leading to well

thought out, long-term goals, the letter said.

"To know that decisions are being made based on an old and loosely put together plan is disheartening to say the least," the letter added.

Because the timber harvesting project is underway, Graeper and Voelke said their organizations want to help the city develop a comprehensive watershed protection plan to guide future decisions.

The watershed council, Graeper said, could offer the city technical assistance

and possibly funds to create a comprehensive watershed protection plan. At the March 9 City Council meeting, both organizations will propose how, through partnerships, the city and various stakeholders might go through a watershed protection planning process.

"Regardless of what is happening now, that's still a really good idea," Voelke said. "We just want to support the city's ability to make decisions about the watershed in the context of the big picture."

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