

Committee seeks a more robust firehouse



R.J. MARX/SEASIDE SIGNAL

The Gearhart firehouse.

While the Gearhart Firehouse may look just fine to the casual observer, for firefighters and the community, the building is a disaster waiting to happen: seismically unable to survive a Cascadia quake, too small to accommodate modern equipment and inadequate to provide shelter or a gathering space after a natural disaster.

Volunteer firefighter Josh Como was among others at a January volunteer appreciation night to voice their support for a new building.

"Whether it's for ease and accessibility for people to get in and out or to store equipment, right now we're maxed out on lockers to have people store their gear," Como said. "We don't have space for any more new people or even to have drills."

"Infrastructure is huge for Gearhart now," Mayor Matt Brown said. "We have to make sure we protect our firefighters."

During his 2016 campaign, Brown said a new firehouse would be a top city priority.

"It's pretty dire," fire committee co-chairman Jay Speakman said. "This station was built in the late 1950s by local volunteer labor that came and did most of the work themselves."

The structure was constructed using hollow tile and cinder block, long before the impacts of a Cascadia Subduction Zone event were known. "It's been determined that any reasonably sized earthquake will possibly collapse the building," Speakman said. "We've got many hundreds of thousands of dollars of equipment in this building and it would not be prudent to jeopardize that by having a building that's not stable."

Committee member Gary Gillam pointed to a cornerstone with a dedication date of 1958.

"We have to create something for these guys that addresses the needs of today," Gillam said. "It's sagging about 5 inches and we have a lake every time it rains hard."

Brown, former Mayor Dianne Widdop, along with councilors like committee co-chairwoman Sue Lorain and councilor Dan Jesse, have called the firehouse the city's most pressing issue.

The current building, Lorain said, is "not only a piece of junk at the present time, if we get a new building, it would enhance our city even more."

The endgame, Lorain said, might be to locate the new building out of the tsunami zone.

"When we first started the committee a year ago, we all had a tour of the fire hall," she said. "We learned about the cinder blocks that are cracking, we learned about the walls that are crumbling inside. It's not such a different scenario from the schools."

Learning from the school bond

When Gearhart voted in 2006 on a \$3.75 million general obligation bond measure to address the problem, the proposal included plans for a high-end building to house the police department,

SEEN FROM SEASIDE

R.J. MARX



City Hall and fire station.

"Several years ago there was a bond issue put together by the fire department with no citizen input at all," City Administrator Chad Sweet said. "To a lot of people it seemed to be extremely expensive with a lot of bells and whistles that may not have been necessary."

The vote that year was 327-231, with 58 percent of residents voting against it.

Sweet, the city's liaison to the firehouse committee, said he believes if the city had asked for a fire station alone in 2006, voters would have approved it. "One of the issues we found by adding the city hall as part of the construction that it politicized the issue," he said this week. "This time we're exploring an approach to just replace the fire station."

But a second vote has waited more than 10 years as other pressing economic and infrastructure needs siphoned attention.

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Jay Speakman,
fire committee co-chairman

In 2006, Gearhart voters approved a bond for a \$3.75 million water treatment plant. In 2009, bond votes passed for a new fire engine and a five-year levy for a new fire station north of the city at West Lake Lane and Highway 101.

Add to that the \$99.7 million bond to move district schools — including Gearhart Elementary School — out of the tsunami zone, and a new firehouse again got pushed to the back burner.

That bond, like the firehouse bond, had been put in front of voters in 2013 when it was proposed on a grander scale. At \$128.8 million, voters said not only no, but "hell no."

However officials, students and community members knew that this wasn't a matter of if, but when — and fashioned the new bond to show greater economy of scale. The summer and fall was spent raising support for the measure — which ultimately won convincing approval.

Some of the same voices involved in the school bond are seeking a safer Gearhart as members of the fire safety committee.

"I am on the fire safety committee," said Lori Lum Toyooka, who was also active in the school district's "Vote Yes for Our Local Schools" group. "The building is old and needs to be updated to current modern standards."

During last fall's campaign, advocates of the new campus took the case not only to parents but to retirees, families without children, vacation property owners and other stakeholders who may have been neglected during the 2013 bond campaign.

"Because I worked on the school bond issue with Lori and others, we should go to school with what the school bond people did with a lot of the grassroots meetings in homes," Gillam said. "It really helped this time, as opposed to when it went down three years ago."

Details await

The firehouse committee was appointed in September 2015, tasked to examine the problem and come up with solutions.

The committee looked at seven possible sites, he said, both city and private property, including the current location. "We created a matrix to grade all of these sites," Speakman said. "We started with geology and some of them were eliminated right away, because they were close to water."

Sites with low elevation and unstable soils were also removed from consideration.

Locations were prioritized by distance from the general population, accessibility for fire volunteers and "survivability."

While the report is not yet public, Speakman said the group "went wide" in their search, considering the current Pacific Way location, the Highlands, east of the highway and on higher ground within the city.

"The bottom line is we want a building that is survivable after a good-sized earthquake that could be followed by a tsunami," Speakman said.

In response to the 2006 bond defeat, committee members this time around have decided to concentrate on a public safety building which would include fire and police, Speakman said. "We decided this existing city hall could be renovated, which could save a lot of money right up front."

"Last time the volunteers and the city worked up a plan, the residents weren't very much a part of the discussions," Sweet said. "This time a group of residents have come together to discuss the issue and bring this up as a grassroots effort."

As for costs, "We don't have a number," Speakman said. "We're still in the exploration phases. We do have an architect and we do have a grant from the city."

The question is: Is there a civic will for a new construction project?

For firefighters and the community they protect, it can't come soon enough.

Do they still teach civics anymore?

When you get to be as old as I am, it's OK to repeat yourself and with this story I may have. It goes with the syndrome of aging so it's all right.

They have always told us that two subjects one doesn't discuss in mixed company are politics and religion. I find this hard to accept because each is fascinating and I'm not politically correct enough to obey the suggestion.

Being the voice of one "crying in the wilderness" is not too happy a spot either. I'm glad the inauguration is finally over and we can get back to some semblance of normalcy.

Choosing a cabinet has been interesting. When I was in school, we had a device to remember the different departments of government. It was the letters in ST WAPNIACL, which signified State, Treasury, War, Army, Post Office, Navy, Interior, Agriculture, Commerce and Labor. I don't even know if these are today's designations and others have probably been added, but changes are inevitable.

According to man-on-the-street Q&A sessions by a well known TV personality, some of today's "students" don't seem to know anything about anything like "who is buried in Grant's tomb." School for me was an adventure. Do they ever teach civics anymore?

Along about the 1930s, I remember a cover of the Liberty magazine, which sold for 5 cents. Can you imagine publishing any magazine for a nickel? The illustration was of two young ladies pulling each other's hair. They were "flappers" so it may have been the late 1920s. Each was wearing a necklace — the blond with a donkey and the brunette with an elephant. The caption was "a little political pull." In my mind's eye, it's still very vivid.

The night of Jan. 10, I watched news from Portland and the snow was coming down in great chunks. Those reporting at the scene were dressed like Alaskans and were certainly having some difficulties. What a job! Traffic in one instance was at a stand still — streams of cars because one vehicle at the front of the line had gone launchwise. Eventually they moved again. We were told there would be snow from Tillamook to Astoria, so I wasn't surprised to see one-half to an inch of white in the a.m., although it was mostly melted by 11:30 a.m. It ain't summer yet!

MLK, Jr. Day dawned a little springy. It certainly brought out the birds with a temperature of 40 degrees. When I got up, ice was still on the puddles but after it melted, sparrows and starlings all joined in a drink and a communal splash. Can you imagine that? Drinking your bath water? It's for the birds.

A trio of deer, mom and two well-grown fawns, were back in my yard on Thursday. Saturday there were only two and one (mom) had an injured hind leg, possibly broken though she was able to hop around on three. I hate to think the third creature might have been hurt in the same incident. I know they rescue birds all the time, so I called the police, not knowing what to do. "Letting nature take its course" seemed to be the order of the day.

Laugh Lines

Q: How should you treat a baby goat?

A: Like a kid.

Q: How do you mount a horse?

A: Take it to a taxidermist.

LETTERS

Winter hunger

The South County Community Food Bank, a food pantry, has always valued the support of the local community. Although there are organizations at the national, state and local level helping us, hungry families, children and seniors have been fed through the generosity of locals and businesses for more than 30 years.

Community support in 2016 was remarkable, particularly during the holidays. Thank you. Now winter is here. This is the hungriest time of the year. Work is scarce and the holiday contributions are finished. Community support is needed more than ever. Whatever you can do will help those who cannot help themselves.

At this time we think of the locals who started this food pantry. The founders, like Harry Miller, are now gone. They wanted to create an institution to help feed the neediest in this community. The South County Community Food Bank, a food pantry and a 501(c)(3) organization is still here, and the children and their families and other hungry locals are still here.

Your support is needed the most at this time of the year. You can contribute by mailing a check to P.O. Box 602, Seaside, OR 97138, or by dropping a contribution of food or money to our building at 2041 N. Roosevelt Drive in Seaside. Whatever you can do will help. Thank you.

James C. Casterline
South County Community Food Bank
board member and past president
Gearhart

Use power plant emissions

"Let's get rid of natural gas." Since I drove into Clatsop County 14 years ago, this has been the rallying cry heard from every side. My Seaside home and my hot water are heated with natural gas, and my electricity is generated using natural gas. What to do?

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