

# Gearhart transit plan gets green light

Hwy. 101 at center of 20-year goals

By R.J. Marx  
Seaside Signal

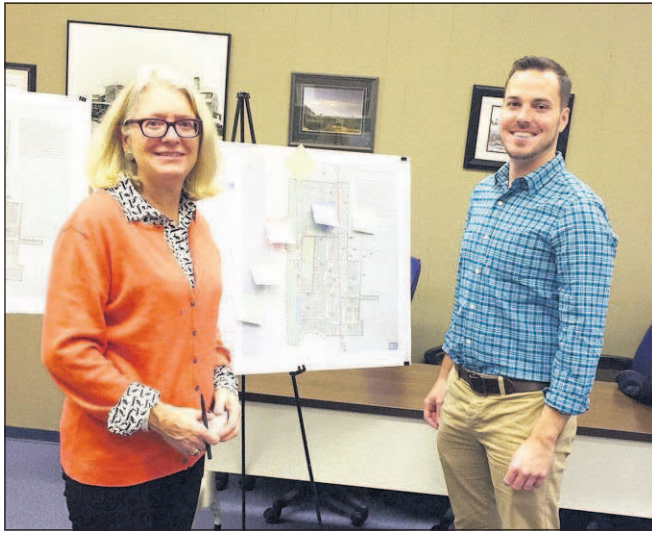
With the goal of identifying future transportation needs and opening the door to grant funding, the City Council has a transportation system plan.

The goal is to anticipate growth and know how to deal with it, City Planner Carole Connell said.

“There will be more demand placed on the city, and this is a program for us to deal with that,” Connell said.

At the top of the list is the reconfiguration of U.S. Highway 101. Planners want to provide greater turning safety and connectivity between the east and west sides of the roadway and reduce bottlenecks and traffic jams.

Additional projects listed in the plan aim to facilitate tsunami evacuation, infra-



Gearhart Planner Carole Connell and consultant Kevin Chewuk at a public hearing on the transportation system plan early this year.

structure improvements, pedestrian walkways and to ensure that new development complies with the city’s goals.

With one exception, city councilors and Mayor Matt Brown approved the two-volume plan, which presents a blueprint for the city’s trans-

portation systems through 2040.

“I’m a big proponent of it,” Brown said at a public hearing Wednesday, Aug. 2. “It’s been one of our top goals for a long time. I think it’s a no-brainer.”

City Councilor Dan Jesse called the plan “anti-develop-

ment” and said funds would be better spent elsewhere.

## Wish list

The transportation plan prioritizes investments with four tiers, from the \$1.2 million likely to be available through existing funding sources to a wish list that exceeds the likely level of city and state funding through 2040.

Roadway and intersection upgrades, including development of a three-lane configuration on Highway 101 through most of Gearhart, are estimated at \$23 million.

Bridge projects — including replacement of the Highway 101 bridge over Mill Creek and Highway 101 bridge over Neawanna Creek in Seaside — would cost an estimated \$2 million.

According to the plan, 33 pedestrian and bicycle projects would cost an estimated \$25 million to complete. Concepts include sidewalk, path and roadway crossing improvements, and a network of bi-

cycle lanes, marked on-street routes and shared-use paths.

Transit and system management projects comprise the remainder of proposed project costs. None are funded or planned, Connell said, but adoption of the plan will enable the city to request outside funding for future transportation improvements.

Adoption of the plan, prepared by the city, Oregon Department of Transportation, DKS Associates and Angelo Planning Group, does not commit the city to the projects.

“There is a whole other process outside of this,” said Kevin Chewuk, a lead transportation planner with DKS.

Higher cost “aspirational” projects listed in the plan include sidewalk replacement, road extensions and Highway 101 reconfiguration.

Of a potential \$51 million for 59 spending projects, the plan lists 35 locally funded transportation projects at an estimated cost of \$28 million to the city.

## Eclipse may slow, stop bus service

Seaside Signal

Bus routes in Clatsop County may be delayed or canceled because of the number of people traveling through the area to view the solar eclipse on Aug. 21.

Sunset Empire Transportation District Executive Director Jeff Hazen said, “The Oregon Department of Transportation has predicted that those traveling on Oregon highways on the days before and after the solar eclipse, may experience the biggest traffic event in Oregon history and residents should prepare ahead for delays, cancellations or closures.”

Riders can follow the district’s Facebook page or website, <http://bit.ly/2w7MUJx>, for information on delays or cancellations.

# Tree-topping at core of beach dune controversy

Gearhart from Page 1A

“That’s what got this process going,” Brown said.

The ordinance, written in 1994, was a leading discussion item among committee members.

City Attorney Peter Watts said the ordinance “creates problems for both sides,” in its ambiguity. “One of the things we’ve talked about is getting clarity to the process. Do noxious weeds apply to native plants? Trees are an issue. Grass is an issue. How do you measure 50 percent of grass?”

## Search for consensus

In January, residents filled the Gearhart Fire Station for an education forum and town hall meeting on an amendment permitting the removal of noxious weeds.

The panel of city officials, state parks representatives and other experts was organized by Margaret Marino, a resident who had expressed concerns about the vegetation at city meetings and reached out to state departments and ecologists for assistance.

The workshop led to the formation of the Dune Vegetation Committee, comprised of both permanent and part-time Gearhart residents. The city suggested the committee study the issues concerning vegetation and vehicle access within the Beach and Active Dunes Overlay District. Members of the committee would then make suggestions to the City Council regarding potential changes to the ordinance.

## Recommendations

The committee formed in April and presented its findings to the City Council at its July meeting.

In the committee’s recommendations, all but emergency vehicles are to be limited within the zone — known as the Beach and Active Dunes Overlay District — not only cars, but trucks, motorized mowers, bush hogs and other equipment.

The committee recommended installation of locked gates at all areas where motorized vehicles are able to enter



Residents seek guidance as to how much dune vegetation may be removed or trimmed.



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the overlay district.

A recommendation concerning tree pruning or vegetation removal offers guidelines for homeowners to remove noxious weeds or trees.

The committee’s fourth recommendation would allow the city administrator to issue a permit for removal of trees which are larger than 12 inches diameter.

Van Hoomissen said that while early meetings were

contentious, later meetings found some consensus. “Over time, I feel the committee’s work became much more collaborative,” he said. “The committee talked about views, elk, different trees, different noxious weeds, grass, historical evolution of the dunes, historical practices of various property owners who owned property in or abutting the dunes.”

“The issue of whether large trees can be topped or removed entirely is the main contentious issue, and it remains for council to decide,” Van Hoomissen said.

Committee member John Green said he would like to see a moratorium on cutting on public property until the issue is resolved. “I think before we do anything, we have to have a parks master plan,” Green said.

## Code change sought

Gearhart’s Jack Delaney, a member of the committee who disputed aspects of the findings, said the committee was “illegitimate” because it was comprised of nonresidents.

Their findings “totally ignored the expertise of all the experts in the area,” he said,

naming a number of county, state and city agencies. “Not once did we have any discussion or information from them.”

Committee member Bill Corti called the composition of the committee “unbalanced,” and sought guidance for pruning or trimming trees on city-owned property.

“I think adjacent property owners should be able to thin or remove the trees,” committee member Jim Furnish said after the meeting. “I think the city will be battling about it for years.”

Clarification of city rules will likely require a change to city code, City Administrator Chad Sweet said. To that end, the city plans to hold a work session to discuss recommendations in September.

Potential changes would go through a public process at Planning Commission and City Council meetings with the goal of crafting a revised ordinance.

“In the end, what we found is the contentiousness over a small part of the large issues often masks the fact that there is widespread agreement on much of the issue,” Van Hoomissen said. “We should not take the view that everything is contentious. Because everything is not.”

## Issues raised about traffic, growth

Renewal from Page 1A

have urban renewal money we wouldn’t be able to do that,” City Councilor Tita Montero said. “Seaside will benefit to have the south entry to the city not look like a scumbag.”

## How it works

Urban renewal is a financing program authorized under state law and implemented locally allowing the use of property tax revenues from city and regional taxing districts to grow the economy in blighted or underdeveloped areas.

The Turnaround and Prom, the city’s sewage plant, 12th Avenue improvements and construction of a new library are the products of past urban renewal plans.

Using tax-increment financing, funding comes through increases in assessed values of local properties.

As new development arrives and existing properties are improved, assessments rise and see property tax increases. Property taxes on the growth in assessed value in the urban renewal area are frozen and increases are allocated to the city’s urban renewal agency and not the taxing districts.

Property taxes don’t raise for the individual. Instead, a portion of what people are already paying will go to urban renewal rather than to other taxing districts, urban renewal consultant Elaine Howard said.

The urban renewal district plans to fund projects like road and sewer system needs for the new Seaside school campus, storefront redesign, property acquisition, and most notably, an estimated \$45 million for bridge improvements at avenues A, G, S and U.

“We are very committed to the concept of urban renewal,” Mayor Jay Barber said. “It really is about improving what we already have, and without urban-renewal we would not have the financial resources to complete those projects.”

## Community concerns

One of the aspects Pincetich took issue with was the idea of annexing 32 acres of unincorporated forest land as a part of the new district. She said she was involved in discussions about expanding the urban growth boundary, which was tabled last summer.

“The (Portland State University) population statistics have been published and cites negligible growth for Clatsop County. Why the urban growth expansion?” Pincetich said.

City Manager Mark Winstanley said that 32 acres out the 560 acres in the entire plan was included in the urban renewal district so that the city could possibly

have another point of entry to build road, water or sewer infrastructure to the school site.

“I think there has been some confusion between the urban growth boundary expansion and the urban renewal district. They are two distinct things,” he said. “It’s not about increasing the size of the city.”

However, city councilors received written testimony hours before the hearing from Sean Malone, an attorney with the Oregon Coast Alliance, who asserts that by including this property in the urban renewal district the city is not in compliance with its comprehensive plan.

Malone wrote that the comprehensive plan says forestlands “shall be conserved for forest uses,” and argued that “this policy would not be served in any way by using the property for the school district.”

Winstanley, as well as the City Council, declined to comment on Malone’s testimony because they did not have a chance to read it before the meeting.

## Traffic and development

Others were concerned about improvement projects on Wahanna Road and Spruce Street bringing more traffic into otherwise quiet residential areas. Residents also feared language in the plan allowing eminent domain, an act that allows a city to buy property for fair market value in order to complete an infrastructure project.

“We have a very quiet neighborhood,” said James Hall, who lives on Cooper Street. “This could create a lot more traffic and effect the general peacefulness of our neighborhood.”

Winstanley said Seaside has never used eminent domain in urban renewal projects in the past 32 years, and said residents should not worry about that changing this time around.

City Councilor Steve Wright also noted that developing roads to the new school site was not just up to the city, but of the transportation advisory commission and the school district, and that this was an ongoing discussion.

## Public involvement

After the hourlong hearing, there was still a sense from some residents that their voices were still not being heard.

Pincetich said it’s not just about the number of public meetings held, but the number of public comment periods to allow the public to interact with the city.

“There was one hearing on the conformance to the comprehensive plan, but until now no public hearings about the actual merits of the plan,” she said.

# Volunteer efforts help charter school meet deadline

Academy from Page 1A

with the city finished and the proper permits were in hand, the academy was left with about a month to renovate the building up to code. Installing fire safety equipment, addressing Americans with Disabilities Act access concerns and other general maintenance projects were needed.

“It is thanks to Coaster Construction and all the volunteers that we were successful,” Moore said.

Almost every weekend over the past month, Moore said volunteers came out to help clear brush, paint the interior and exterior of the school and clean a build-

ing that sat vacant for more than a year.

Moore has also received a number of in-kind donations, such as school supplies, organizational items and a defibrillator from Cannon Beach Fire and Rescue.

“People have really come out of the woodwork for this,” Moore said.

## More to go

There are still a few hurdles left for the academy before officially crossing the finish line. The charter school was awarded temporary occupancy with an agreement that a full fire safety system would be installed by November. This is one of the largest renovations needed and

will take more time to complete, Moore said. The building was not equipped with any fire safety system when it was operating as a children’s center.

While the charter school has enough students enrolled to operate, the academy is still recruiting to fill more seats before fall, Moore said. Earlier this year, the academy had as many as 40 students. Moore said she has no concerns about meeting the goal, however, and attributes fluctuating numbers to the fact the status of the school has been up in the air because of the late location change.

“I think there are a lot of families who were waiting for this day to happen,” Moore said.