

Airport bond vote could foreshadow trouble

Three of four Seaside precincts reject bond

By Derrick DePledge
EO Media Group

Voters rejected a \$1.96 million bond measure in May that would have helped finance the expansion of Life Flight Network and other improvements at Astoria Regional Airport.

The bond failed by a slim, 146-vote margin in a special district election where voter turnout was a paltry 35 percent. But a closer look inside the vote tally by precinct showed a pattern that could foreshadow trouble for future bond measures, like money for a county jail.

Precincts in Astoria favored the airport bond, while Warrenton was divided. The rest of Clatsop County, outside pockets of Seaside, North Clatsop, Hamlet and Walluski, went against the bond.

The geographic divide could be important if the county seeks a bond to turn the North Coast Youth Correctional Facility in Warrenton into a larger county jail. County commissioners have ordered a study into whether the youth facility, which is closing because of state budget cuts, could be an alternative to the overcrowded 60-bed jail in Astoria.

The rejection of the airport bond by voters outside of Astoria suggests advocates for relocating the county



JOSHUA BESSE/EO MEDIA GROUP

Life Flight Network wanted financial help for a new hangar, while the other infrastructure improvements at the south end of the airport could have enabled future development at the regional hub.

jail would have to make a strong argument that a jail would benefit the entire county.

“People are concerned about the amount of taxes that they pay on their property. And I think that all bond measures, regardless of the benefit — for the most part — people are going to be skeptical,” said Jim Knight, the executive director of the Port of Astoria, which backed the airport bond.

Trapped by infighting

Former Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen and state Sen. Betsy Johnson, two of the most well-known politicians in the county, led a political action committee for the airport bond. But the vote was called on relatively

short notice, the amount of the bond was reduced for technical reasons just weeks before the election, and the merits of the infrastructure investment became trapped within the bitter infighting at the Port.

Knight believes several factors doomed the vote, from the unexpected opposition from some on the Port Commission to the lack of a voters’ pamphlet. He also thinks some voters in South County were apprehensive about making another financial commitment so soon after the \$99.7 million in bonds they approved last November to move three schools out of the tsunami inundation zone.

Port commissioners all said they supported Life Flight Network, but

Commissioner Bill Hunsinger attacked the airport bond as a giveaway to special interests, while Commissioner Stephen Fulton, who was running for a second term in the May election, called it speculative development that should be rejected.

“I don’t think any of us were really prepared for the negative position, or the anti-bond measure information that was being put out there,” Knight said.

Unity

Sheila Roley, the superintendent of the Seaside School District, said she heard from people before the election who did not understand exactly why the Port was asking for the bond money.

Life Flight Network, which provides emergency medical flights, wanted financial help for a new hangar, while the other infrastructure improvements at the south end of the airport could have enabled future development at the regional hub. Taxpayers would have paid an estimated \$12.35 a year for property assessed at \$100,000 as the bond matured over four years.

“I did hear quite a few people mention their misunderstanding of what it was and why would we be voting for something that’s going to benefit Astoria,” Roley said.

Three of the four precincts in Seaside rejected the airport bond, as did precincts in Gearhart and Cannon Beach.

Roley said there is always a little bit of South County versus North County sentiment, but she believes the failure of the airport bond does not cloud a potential bond for a jail. She said it is easier for voters to see how a jail would benefit the entire county.

“I think that was fairly issue specific,” she said of the May vote.

‘Messaging is really important’

Clatsop County could place a bond for a jail on the ballot as soon as next year, when there are primary and general elections that typically draw more voter interest.

Voters in May 2012 turned down a \$14 million bond measure to expand the jail in Astoria. The measure failed 56 percent to 44 percent despite evidence of jail overcrowding and appeals from law enforcement, led by Sheriff Tom Bergin. Voter turnout was 52.6 percent, significantly higher than the 35 percent for the airport bond in May.

Scott Lee, the chairman of the county Board of Commissioners, favors putting bond measures on general election ballots where a broader slice of the electorate can decide.

More importantly, the county would need to craft a compelling rationale to convince enough voters from Astoria to Cannon Beach to pay more in property taxes. “I think messaging is really important,” Lee said.

Forestland eliminated from proposal

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Priorities are determined by the Seaside Improvement Commission and may change over time, Howard wrote. If new projects are proposed, they must be added to the plan through an amendment in a public meeting at the improvement commission.

Forestland a concern

The elimination of the Weyerhaeuser property from the plan came after a City Council hearing earlier this month in which residents urged councilors to reconsider.

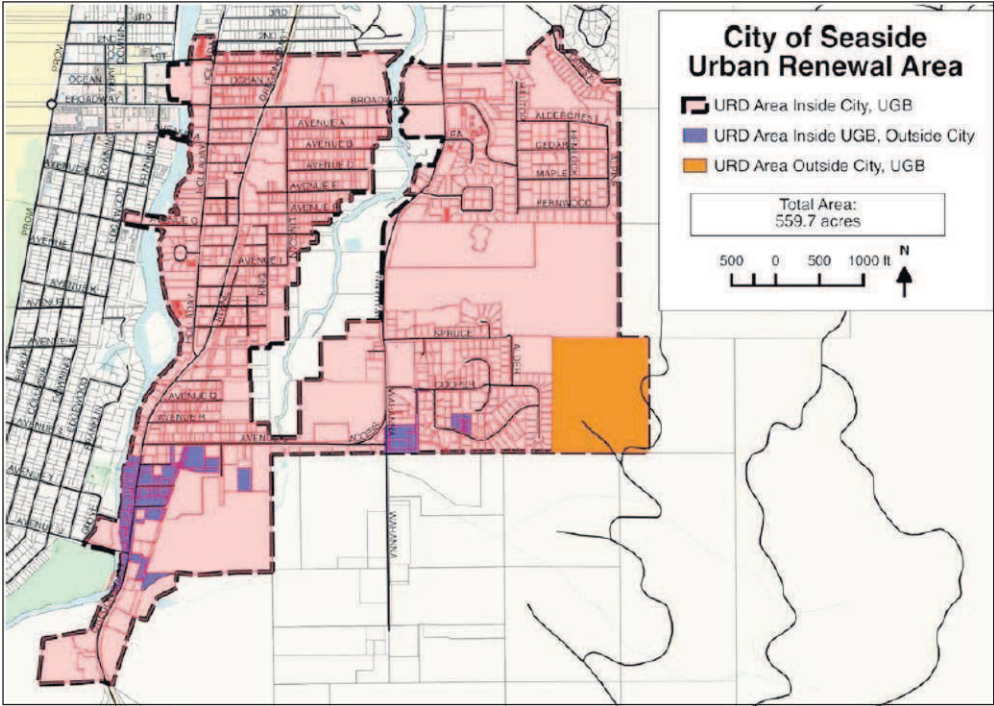
Members of the Oregon Coast Alliance disputed findings that the county-zoned parcel owned by Weyerhaeuser is blighted.

“This urban renewal plan seems to be poorly designed, very conclusory and many questions have not been answered, including, but not limited to, why is 32 acres included since a forest parcel cannot be blighted?” Oregon Coast Alliance Land Use Director Cameron La Follette said after the meeting. “A great deal more needs to be done to make sure it is consistent with the Seaside comprehensive plan, and right now it is not.”

This theme was repeated during Monday’s public comment period before city councilors addressed the concern by eliminating the property from the proposal.

They also sought to calm fears of rising property taxes, use of eminent domain and to distinguish the plan from expansion of the urban growth boundary, a separate process based on population projections and other demographic factors.

“Hopefully a lot of those concerns were allayed, and



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Map of Seaside’s urban renewal boundary, including 33 acres of Weyerhaeuser property eliminated from the adopted plan.

people understand this is not an increased tax on homes,” Councilor Randy Frank said. Councilors also considered an amendment clarifying the plan’s water and sewer system policies.

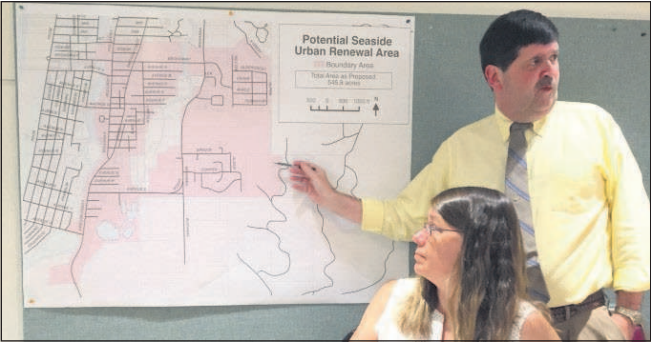
“It is not new language,” Winstanley said. “It is language that is intended to clarify. You’re not adding anything new to the plan.”

Unanimous approval

The City Council unanimously voted to remove the Weyerhaeuser property from the urban renewal district, along with the new verbiage.

The vote was followed by unanimous adoption of the ordinance approving the plan.

The elimination of the Weyerhaeuser property won’t impact the building of the new Seaside School District



R.J. MARX/SEASIDE SIGNAL

Seaside City Manager Mark Winstanley indicates a parcel to be eliminated from the Southeast Seaside Urban Renewal Plan.

campus, Winstanley said after the meeting. “The question is: ‘Do we have to have this parcel in?’ And I said I couldn’t identify any particular project that would be affected.”

The Clatsop County Board of Commissioners, which held a public hearing on the urban renewal plan in July,

meets Sept. 13 to consider the city’s request. If approval is granted, urban renewal district boundaries would be frozen and the land would be designated as a taxing district, possibly as early as October.

“As the assessed value grows, the increment starts to build up,” Winstanley said.

Council divided over inclusivity resolution

Council from Page 1A

the vote been unanimous.

While city councilors may feel safe and protected, many immigrants do not, resident Guadalupe Beltran added.

“We as part of the community want you to be in our shoes for a minute,” she said.

A show of support

Discussion of an inclusivity resolution began early this year when changes in federal immigration policy under President Donald Trump created heightened local awareness.

Advocates believe inclusivity resolutions allow cities to support and recognize the contributions of immigrants without getting drawn into the national clash with the Trump administration over immigration enforcement.

Seaside’s resolution is similar to ones adopted in Astoria, Cannon Beach, Gearhart and Warrenton.

Resolution 3903 recognizes the contribution of immigrants and refugees “of all nations” to the state as workers and taxpayers. Inclusion and integration “of all residents of Seaside is a vital concern for the general welfare of Seaside in all respects. ... Every Seaside resident should be treated with compassion and respect regardless of national origin or citizenship status.”

The resolution does not make Seaside a sanctuary city, a designation some cities have adopted to shield immigrants from federal law enforcement.

“I think it affirms who we are as a community,” Mayor Jay Barber said Monday night.

During public comment, Moulin told city councilors that Seaside’s Hispanic community wants to “work hard and make sure our children are part of both cultures: the Spanish and the American cultures.”

Moulin thanked the city for putting the resolution to a vote.

“It will help us to continue to grow and prosper economically,” she said. “It’s simply a gesture, but I think it’s a really important way to show cities do support everyone in their community. Even though you say that you do, putting it on record is really important.”

Law or policy?

Along with Frank and Morrissey, Councilor Dana Phillips also questioned whether the inclusivity reso-

lution was necessary in a city she said has always respected its immigrant population.

“I really believe we are an inclusive community already, and always have been,” Phillips said.

“Of course everyone up here respects immigrants, refugees and Hispanics,” Morrissey said. “That goes without saying.”

Councilor Tita Montero suggested a different perspective. “We sitting up here are white people,” Montero said. “We haven’t seen what happens in other places. None of us see it all.”

Barber, along with councilors Tom Horning and Steve Wright, joined Montero in speaking in favor of the inclusivity resolution. Phillips also voted in favor. Morrissey and Frank voted against it.

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