

## State minimum wage increased 10 cents per hour

Oregon's lowest-paid workers got a small boost January 1, when the state's minimum hourly wage increased by 10 cents to \$8.50. The 10-cent increase mirrors a 1.15% increase in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) from August 2009 to August 2010, according to the Oregon Bureau of Labor & Industries. A full-time minimum wage worker will earn approximately \$208 more in 2011.

The minimum wage increase is the result of voter-approved Measure 25, enacted in 2002, which requires a minimum wage adjustment annually based on changes in inflation, as defined by the CPI. The CPI, published yearly by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, measures changes over time in

a fixed "market basket" of goods and services. Minimum wage workers did not receive an increase in 2010 under the formula.

In October, the state Employment Department reported

## OSU program for woodland owners

Woodland owners interested in learning about how to maintain their land are invited to attend Woodland Information Night, Wednesday, January 12, at 6:30 p.m. at the OSU Extension Service office in Washington County.

This free program will provide tips on dealing with weeds, planting trees, protecting wooded property from fire, and other issues of interest to small acreage woodland own-

ers. Attendees will find out about the various sources of assistance available to help them achieve their goals and take care of their woodland and associated wildlife, water, and other resources.

The OSU Extension Service office is located in Beaverton at the Capital Center, 18640 NW Walker Road. For more information, contact Amy Grotta at 503-397-3462.

## Rates will increase, but amounts to charge will be determined by studies, not guesses

### From page 4

gon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) because its sewer system pollutes the Nehalem River. In 2005, the city started a project that included new pump lines and stations, and the purchase of the mill site for effluent disposal. This was paid for with Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds and DEQ loan financing. The city currently owes \$6,487,923 (combined principle and interest) on DEQ Loan #R93462. Then, like so many other development activities around Vernonia, the second serious flood in 12 years forced the city to reconsider its plans.

Over the past four years, a succession of city administrators, turnover in the public works department, and "churning" of the City's plans for sewer upgrades, caught this essential project in a stranglehold. Recently, as a result of a "pre-pre-engineering" report by the engineering firm of Brown and Caldwell, the city is closer to understanding the way forward. Earlier this year, members of the City Council, Interim City Administrator Bill Haack and several members of the Public Works Committee, met with Brown and Caldwell, DEQ and a consulting firm retained by DEQ. The agenda included a review of Brown and Caldwell's report, as well as a brainstorming session to find additional ways to reduce the estimated

cost of the project and limit its impact on utility rates. As we understand it, the steps between us and a completed sewer project are as follows:

Pre-pre-engineering:

1. Brainstorm different project ideas. The ideas considered so far include: abandoning the lagoons completely and building a treatment plant, a combination of those two models, wetlands treatment systems (inside and outside the lagoons), effluent management systems like poplar farming, etc.

2. Retaining an engineer to advise the city about the feasibility of these options.

3. Settling on the best design idea developed by the public works committee and the engineers, and producing an estimate of the cost to make that idea real.

Pre-engineering:

4. Using the final idea emerging from Step 3, further improve the resolution of the plans and designs.

5. Provide another estimate based on these refined designs.

6. Reconsider funding opportunities and estimate the impact on utility rates.

7. If indicated, revisit Steps 1 through 6.

Engineering:

8. Prepare full design documents and specifications for the project that emerged from Step 7. These documents need to be so well-designed and writ-

ten that they can be publicly bid, limiting the opportunity for contractors to find loopholes with which to gain a change order. (It is these change orders that push fully funded budgets into the red.)

9. Bid and contract the design documents produced in Step 8.

10. Construct the project.

Vernonia may never see a more opportune time to complete the sewer project. The interest and sympathy of the public sector, beginning with the Governor, has given Vernonia historic levels of state and federal interest in providing help. This interest includes problems like the sewer treatment system. It seems unlikely that the city will ever have the level of outside support available to it right now.

At the same time, construction costs, in general, have taken a dip after the real estate bust of 2008. There will probably never be a less costly time to build the sewer project that is needed to bring the city into compliance.

Finally, the standards that will govern the project's design may be on the verge of changing. Regulatory agencies are beginning to recognize entirely new categories of "pollutants" that must be eliminated from the waste stream. These are very common compounds which will be hard to remove. They include pharmaceuticals, birth control hormones, caffeine

## Sen. Johnson named Vice-chair of Ways and Means Committee

Senator Betsy Johnson (D-Scappoose) has been named Vice-chair of Ways and Means, the Legislature's chief budget-writing committee, and Co-Chair of the Ways and Means subcommittee on General Government for the 2011 Legislative Session.

"We have a lot of hard work in front of us to balance Oregon's budget and set a path for economic recovery," said Johnson, who also served as Vice-Chair of Ways and Means during the 2009 Legislative Session. "I look forward to using my Ways and Means experience to find ways to cut spending while protecting critical services. Oversight and gov-

ernment accountability will be key as we work to close our budget deficit and restore confidence in state services."

As vice-chair of Ways and Means, Johnson is responsible for working with the Co-Chair in crafting the overall state budget. In her role as co-chair of the Subcommittee on General Government, Johnson will oversee the budgets for the Legislative branch, the State Treasurer, the Secretary of State, Department of Revenue, the Governor, and several others state agencies.

The 76th Oregon Legislative Assembly will convene on January 10. Committees will begin meeting on February 1st.

and even cholesterol. Any new system built after these rules are adopted will need to be much more sophisticated and expensive.

So what does all this mean for sewer rates? Unfortunately, it means they will go up. At this point, it is not known how much. However, we are currently accruing interest on \$4,341,153 of expended principle and have accrued to date \$2,146,770 on this open DEQ loan. That interest is being added to our balance, accruing additional interest. It's not unlike having a credit card bill and making no payments. The balance just goes up and up. We need to complete our project as soon as possible to convert this higher-interest rate debt to DEQ into lower-cost, long-term municipal debt. Obviously, this cannot happen for a year or two. In the meantime, the Public Works Committee will recommend that the City Council rededicate the soon-to-expire \$12 per month water payment surcharge as a sewer surcharge to begin paying against the interest accrual on the outstanding DEQ loan amount.

No one in this process, not the engineers, not DEQ, not the City Council, let alone the Public Works Committee has a crystal ball to let us know exactly the right way to proceed. What is known, is that doing nothing will lead to a DEQ enforcement action, and is likely to be the worst possible alter-

native.

The next article will discuss the alternative wastewater systems that were considered in the process of selecting a desired option to take forward into final engineering. At this time the city anticipates selecting a project manager, a project engineer, completing a rate study, conducting geotechnical analyses of the soils at the lagoons, and upgrading existing pumping stations to protect them from flood damage in a future high water event. Over the next year more information will be provided on each of these elements of the wastewater project as they develop.

Source: City of Vernonia – Public Works Committee

## Unemployment still high in Columbia Co.

Columbia County's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 12.4 percent in November, essentially unchanged from the previous month (12.1%) and the year before (12.7%). The rate was above the statewide (10.6%) and the national (9.8%) rates. Total employment climbed by 138 to 22,075 and the number of unemployed people increased by 237 to 2,903. Total employment this November was 633 more than one year before and there were 13 more people unemployed this year.