

2013 State of the City

Woodburn, as both a community and a local government, has been through challenging times in recent years. We have met them and carried on. We can all be proud of that.

I would like to say our community's future looks rosy. But it depends on a number of factors, not all of which are within our control. We don't control the economy; we don't control the actions of Oregon state agencies or the Oregon Legislature; and no one controls the U.S. Congress. We must do our best to keep a watchful eye on the world around us and make sure our own house is kept in the best possible order.

Our biggest challenge as a local government is having costs increase faster than revenue. On the cost side, health care costs and PERS reserve obligations have the most potential for trouble. Most of our employees are on a high-deductible health insurance plan as of the first of the year, and substituting this for our former plan will at least result in lower cost increases for future years. PERS is a high-profile issue that needs to be addressed by the Oregon Legislature this session.

Every city, county and school district in our state is depriving fine people in their working years of jobs and depriving their taxpayers of services to pay for unsustainable retirement benefits. I am grateful that the Governor appears to recognize this, and I hope the Legislature does as well.

On the revenue side, our biggest challenge is no growth and slow growth. That picture is finally improving. There were a total of 262 building permits issued in the 2012 calendar year. Of those, there were building permits issued for 22 new single-family homes and 23 new multi-family/commercial/industrial buildings for a total of 55 new structures. In the previous two years, new construction permits were practically nonexistent. When much of our general fund revenue — the revenue that pays for police, parks and the library — comes from property taxes, having our tax base increase is good news. So is having money coming into the system development funds that help pay for our infrastructure. If development and redevelopment within our current urban growth boundary continues, and we resolve the issues with our urban growth boundary expansion, we could have some much-improved revenue in the years ahead.

As a local government, we were able to delay the impact of the economic downturn longer than many jurisdictions. We benefited from the growth we experienced in the 1990s and early 2000s, and from conservative financial practices. We eventually had to take measures that resulted in the elimination of 13 positions. I am sorry that was necessary, just as I am sorry for some of the consequences of that decision. I hear from people who would like longer library hours, better street maintenance, more code enforcement and many other things — I would, too — but we are trying to do the best we can with what we have.

In that vein, we have done many things in the past year that will continue on into this one. I believe our city government has finally matured into that of a middle-sized city, not a sleepy small town. We have the capacity to deal with development, project management and long-range planning. We have the human resources and legal staff to not only react to, but foresee problems and forestall them when possible. Our police department is one of the best agencies in the state, and its management and supervisory team have the expertise to conduct much of its staff training in house. We have adjusted responsibilities where needed, and we have even added the occasional position when it makes sense.

We are doing everything we can to cooperate with other jurisdictions, whether it is offering support, sharing staff or even contracting with smaller jurisdictions to provide services. The Woodburn Police Department was involved in the response to the Clackamas Town Center shooting incident. Our building department and those of several similar sized cities in our area cover for each other during times off or sudden upticks in work. Our Information Systems Department offers support and design services to several of the smaller agencies and cities in our area.

We are also taking advantage of grants from public and private sources to leverage the value we receive from our tax dollars. Our three police dogs come to us through generous private donations. John Hunter, our library manager, attended the International Book Fair in Mexico at a minimal cost to the city and replenished our Spanish language collection. A grant from Marion County enabled recycling at the Woodburn Fiesta Mexicana. Legion Park will be adding new park equipment, courtesy of a grant from the state. Our transit system continues to operate at a higher level of service through grants from various sources. I could go on with a much longer list. The bottom line is that we have dedicated staff that find these resources and put them to use.

Our urban renewal efforts continue slowly but steadily. The owners of six properties have participated in the design consultation program that started last summer. Several more have taken advantage of the grant and loan program. We have contracted with the Woodburn Downtown Association to cooperate in putting on downtown events. We are excited about some new proposals for businesses in the area, and some changes in ownership that might lead to other opportunities.

The biggest thing ahead of us in the coming year is the start of the Woodburn interchange project. Yes, it's really here. The Oregon Department of Transportation continues to tell us that bids will be opened in late May, and I will believe that until we hear otherwise. If the Legislature accepts the recommendation of the Oregon Transportation Commission to move \$10 million that was not spent on a Lane County project to our project, we will be fully funded. Serious construction activity will begin shortly afterward. Clearing and utility work is already getting started. I can promise you that this will be a minor headache for all of us and a major one for businesses near the interchange and residents of West Woodburn and The Estates. I do believe that it will be both an economic and aesthetic boon to our community when it is complete.

In conclusion, I think we have accomplished a great deal in challenging times. I think there is light at the end of the tunnel, and I don't think it's the proverbial train.