

2008 State of the City by Mayor Alice Norris, Oregon City

February 12, 2008

Change is in the air. You can't escape from it. Change is happening. Big change. Bold change. Real change. Change we can believe in. Change is inevitable.

Some changes are the result of years of painstaking planning. Sometimes circumstances force us to change.

Change is coming...Fire/EMS

The biggest change in Oregon City last year happened not because of strategic planning, but because our **Fire District** said NO. When Clackamas Fire District #1 said they could no longer subsidize Oregon City's fire and emergency medical protection, we rolled up our sleeves to change the situation. Three focus groups, nine months, and hundreds of staff and citizen hours later, Oregon City now has permanent and stable fire and Emergency Medical Services for our children and grandchildren.

South End Fire Station, unfortunately, has been closed for the past 5 years. But change is coming.

On July 1, South End Fire station will open 24/7 with a crew of two firefighter paramedics, a full six months earlier than predicted. Medical response times and fire response times will dramatically improve throughout the city, but nowhere more noticeably than in the southern part of our city where residents will experience rapid responses that they've never had before. I don't believe I'm being overly dramatic when I say that lives will be saved because 74% of Oregon City voters said "YES, let's change things."

But this change didn't just happen. In fact our research told us in May that virtually NO VOTERS in Oregon City knew about this crisis. NO ONE! That's when our citizens' committee changed things. This was a huge step for our citizens. Remember Oregon City voters had not passed a property tax increase in 19 years! Once again, I want to recognize the incredible commitment and hard work of **William Gifford and Margy Lynch**, our campaign co-chairs, whom we just named **Citizens of the Year for 2008**. Your resume' can now say: We helped secure permanent fire and emergency medical service for 30,000 people. To all of our change agents: Thank you.

Change is coming to our Facilities:

It better not be news to you that our city hall and police station is severely cramped, inefficient and restrictive. City Hall will become even more crowded in July when our detective unit must move out of South End Fire Station and back into the sardine can. It is a credit to our employees that they remain very productive in such a challenging working environment. But change is coming.

Community Development

In April, our planning department will move to Redside Development's gold LEED certified building on Molalla Avenue. Besides permitting more efficiency and privacy for the public, our community development staff, who have been talking the talk, can now point to their working environment as examples of the green and sustainable construction they promote.

Carnegie Center:

We are discussing another proposal to reduce city hall crowding, one that will recycle a well-loved public facility into a different use: Carnegie Center. Our two Parks & Recreation administrators may share space with the Chamber of Commerce, when the current contract with Fine Art Starts expires in August. The Chamber could provide reception and help us maintain public access and visibility for one of Oregon City's best architectural and historical assets. I hope that an art gallery will continue to be compatible with this proposal.

Change is coming... to our Willamette Waterfront:

Jon Storm Park:

We will have a new park this summer. Although Jon Storm Park construction was delayed because of its archeological sensitivity, this park, the dock, and trail to Clackamette Park will establish the connections that citizens have asked for along the river. We are also building a debris boom to protect the dock, funded largely through an Oregon State Marine Board grant.

Change is coming... to McLoughlin Blvd:

This partnership between Oregon City and ODOT is our biggest transportation project. The McLoughlin Boulevard Enhancement project will begin in May or June –and you will notice the changes from 10th Street to Dunes Drive. Guided by a Citizens Project Advisory Committee, this gateway project will create a welcoming environment that reconnects downtown Oregon City to the Willamette River and our waterfront heritage. Long overdue connections for pedestrians, cyclists, and watercraft will provide for safer and better access. Public art will be integrated into the landscaping and architectural elements, with native trees and shrubs enhancing natural areas and riparian zones. The paving will be underway this summer, along with the sidewalks on one side and the viewing deck.

Some changes create inconvenience, so look for one lane to be closed each way over six weekends and at night during the summer. The biggest change will be summer 2009, when this long anticipated project will be completed.

Change is also coming to our most recognizable icon, **the elevator**. The project to replace the art on the elevator deck (used by 120,000 riders every year) is called ***Elevations in Transition***. Artist Michael Asbill was selected through a rigorous process led by the Clackamas County Arts Alliance and the Oregon City Municipal Elevator Art Steering Committee. Look for artwork on the floor and three installations of interactive photographic prints called lenticular prints that change as a viewer moves through the space. They will depict images from downtown Oregon City, Oregon City's past and present, and construction of the elevator. Completion in July.

Since the beginning of my term in 2003, I have heard clearly from Oregon City citizens that they wanted 'change.' Change for the better.

I'm here to tell you today, that we have delivered. **Change is here.**

- 1) Biggest transportation improvement of last year: \$4.1 m Beaver Creek Road reconstruction (2500 feet of roadway that had no bicycle lanes, deficient bus stops, and largely non-existent sidewalks). This heavily-travelled roadway is now 5 lanes instead of 3; has sidewalks and bike lanes on both sides, two new signal lights and new pipes to replace the 75+ year old steel water lines. Check out our pilot rainwater project that uses curb cuts to route stormwater through bioswales, being sensitive to nearby Newell Creek Canyon. 75 native trees and shrubs will help cleanse the stormwater.
- 2) OC Point opened a few months ago and has created considerable buzz in the Hilltop area.
- 3) June 1 was the Grand Opening of Rivercrest Spray Park, Oregon City's first --the new place to go for birthdays and summer fun.
- 4) You will see changes as you drive into Oregon City. Thanks to a Tourism Action Plan grant from the Clackamas County Tourism Development Council, these new signs will replace the old city entrance signs in April.
- 5) Last year City Hall closed for a day to change a few things. Our City Recorder Nancy Ide orchestrated the Grateful Shred. Besides freeing up needed space throughout the facilities, old building records from 1918 and tax collections from 1882 were found. Over 5400 lbs of paper was recycled, 1290 gallons of paper shredded, and 3,468,688 kilobytes of server space was freed by deleting non-essential emails. Gaining this new space has enabled us to survive until we can remodel or add another trailer.
- 6) Our demographics have changed: our population grew by about 1% (we are now 30,060) and, at the ballot box, our citizens added 170 acres to the 5,947 acres within the city limits.

Change in our crime statistics:

This may be the most satisfying change in Oregon City: **we had a significant decrease in our crime rate.** Even though we have had a large increase in population, Oregon City has also experienced a dramatic decrease in the actual number of criminal offenses from 1996 to the present. As you know, Oregon City suffered through the 70's, 80's and 90's with one of the highest crime rates in the county and the state. Look at these numbers today. The end result for the average citizen of Oregon City is that **the chance of being a victim of crime is less today than in any of the years since 1996.** What a positive change! Thanks to the Oregon City Police department.

As if that wasn't change enough, we added a police bicycle officer to the department. These tough bicycles give law enforcement better access to crowded streets, narrow sidewalks, skinny alleys, down stairs, on trails, and in many areas that are difficult to access with motor vehicles.

These significant changes happened while our police staffing and police facilities still approach crisis (consultant said we needed 10 more officers today). Although we added another officer last year and will budget for another one this year, we remain understaffed at 34 officers. OCPD has a goal of four-minute emergency response for priority 1 calls. But due to lack of resources, our current emergency response time for these calls averages 9 minutes. A change is needed here.

More Changes are Needed

The good news is that the fire annexation measure gives us some financial security. Our crime stats give us some personal security. But some challenges remain unsolved.

Our **Parks and Recreation department** is one of the most understaffed departments in the Northwest and perhaps the nation, according to the consultant putting together our new Parks and Rec Master Plan. The Parks Dept has a maintenance backlog of approximately \$1/2 million and growing. Yet they continue to mow 120 acres and maintain 47 properties totaling 250 acres. Did you know we have 28.8 miles of streams in our city?

Our **swimming pool** is 40 years old, and although basically sound, needs up to \$3 million in facility repairs and improvements to serve the community for another 30 years. We do not foresee change coming because no funding has been identified.

Library: You've heard me say for 3 years that OC's library is open the fewest hours of any city library in Clackamas County, but serves the largest population: 57,607 patrons last year. You've also heard me say that a library is the heart of a community, but yet we've not succeeded in securing funding for increased operations. Change is coming. On your November ballot, you will see a proposal to form a Clackamas County Library Service District. I urge you to join me, the city commission and our Library Board in supporting a County Library District. This is the best option to save our library and the entire library system, for only 39 cents/\$1000.

Street Maintenance:

Without change, this street could be yours! Since the state gas tax hasn't changed since 1992 and since we have more vehicles on the roads than ever, our streets are in pretty bad shape. On the 100 point scale, our streets are at 68. With current funding we can surface treat about one mile per year of our 150 miles of streets. We need to do 7 miles to avoid major reconstruction costs. A study committee made up of 13 citizens representing residential and non-residential interests, such as schools, churches, small and large business, analyzed the condition of Oregon City's streets and looked at all possible funding sources. They have recommended that the most equitable and reliable local option for funding street maintenance is to establish a transportation utility fee. Most of our neighboring cities have instituted such user fees, whose primary purpose is pavement management. Oregon City needs a change-- and we will be discussing this recommendation tonight at our work session.

Changes Beyond our Control:

Building Permits: While we are now clearly in the throngs of a building recession, the construction stats for the year were favorable. Despite the normal slowdown in activity during the winter months, this winter has been exceptionally slow. Normal activity is 15-20 house permits issued per month. In December we issued 5 new house permits, but only one new house permit the entire month of January!

The Cove and The Rivers

This is the third year; I've talked with you about the possibility of exciting changes in our Regional Center, our two big economic development projects. They would not be on the table today if they were not inside our urban renewal district...the challenges of building on garbage in a floodplain would be far too expensive. Without urban renewal assistance for the infrastructure improvements, we wouldn't be talking today about The Cove or The Rivers. Both projects have responsible developers who are committed to Oregon City's unique character and to building in a sustainable manner. Both projects remain in due diligence.

First, the **Cove**. This mixed-used waterfront village proposal is primarily residential, with parks, paths, waterfront restaurants, office space, 42 townhomes, 258 condominiums, a canoe & kayak launch and marina. With any luck, we'll have a ground-breaking this year.

The Rivers is more challenging. The Rivers is a large mixed-use development with a blend of retail, office, and entertainment on 62-acres at the northern gateway to Oregon City. We are working with CenterCal and Fred Bruning to bring this project to life. But the challenge is this: to bring the property up to developable standards will require gap funding of \$67 million to make this project financially feasible. The largest single item is the needed improvements to the failing interchange at I205/213, a cost of \$22 million. This improvement, however, does not just fix the interchange for the impact created by The Rivers, but provides needed capacity for the entire region and state. So the question becomes: should this fix be solely Oregon City's responsibility? We are working with the state, Metro, and the county to share the burden. And then there is methane mitigation, flood plain issues, and putting pilings through the garbage to support buildings and roads.

The City increased our urban renewal debt limit last year to be able to assist this project and others. And, by the way, we also lowered your taxes by 53 cents/\$1000...a very nice change indeed!

Why did we do that? What is the importance of this project?

- 1) The Rivers is a catalyst project for Oregon City. It will stimulate jobs, attract other businesses, and help sustain the small businesses already located here. At the last public open house for The Rivers, someone asked: Why is everything in Oregon City always at the End of something; why not at the beginning? THIS could be the beginning.
- 2) It may be our only chance for many years to develop the wasteland in our north end and reclaim an old garbage dump. The costs will only go higher.

- 3) The development of The Rivers will create tax increment to enable our Urban Renewal district to fund projects in the downtown and on 7th Street. The land is worth almost nothing today. You saw its current condition in the slides.

This would definitely be a change for the better.

Yes, the slowdown of the economy is affecting our development and business community like everywhere else. But I want to assure you that a lack of customers was not the reason for some recent business closures, including Black Point Inn. Oregon City is supporting higher quality restaurants. Have you tried to get into Highland Still House or Mia Familia or Bugatti's on a Friday night?

The voices for change continue...

I saved Sustainability for last, because it is so important! It was our #1 goal last year until February, when it was replaced by 'Save fire and EMS.' Our city resources, time, and energies had to be redirected towards that end. But despite this diversion, the commitment of our staff has kept us moving in the right direction.

- Our city fleet now has its first hybrid vehicle-- for Community Development.
- We are encouraging new construction to be LEED certified.
- We will adopt the Park Place & Beavercreek Concept Plans in the next few weeks to provide a blueprint for future growth, local services, and employment within the city, while preserving natural areas, parks and trails. These two plans have been citizen-driven and reflect our community values of protection of our natural resources while planning for growth and maintaining a vibrant and livable city.
- We are in the process of updating our codes to increase protections for our steep slopes and unstable areas.
- We will consider a Tree Protection ordinance this year.

So Oregon City is going green in ways that make a difference, but we certainly haven't gotten the word out. Hopefully, 2008 will be the year we create a Sustainability Plan and can say that our city facilities are measurably green. I know that many of you will want to be involved in helping craft our plan, and assist us in working with local and regional partners on one of the most important issues of our time, reducing our carbon footprint.

We know we can depend on the leadership of those already practicing principles of sustainability in various ways, such as Rose Holden and her innovative plans for the OC Golf Course property.

When I think about **changes on the horizon**, I worry about losing The Cove or The Rivers projects, the increasing litigation that has increased our city's legal fees by thousands of dollars last year, about funding transportation needs for our rapid growth, about how to communicate better with our citizens so you can be stronger partners in helping solve the challenges we face,

about how we designate urban and rural reserves, about how to solve the regional sewer problems without compromising our Tri-City customers, and about not having enough staff to meet citizen demands for service,

But I am hopeful and an eternal optimist. This is my 6th State of the City report to you – and the first time that the outlook for the city has not been a little dark and threatening. Fire annexation has helped change things. We now have a building block on which to anchor future solutions. And as that campaign graphically showed: Change comes from you. Change can unite us or change can divide us. I vote for the kind of change that builds community. Change that is sustainable, that keeps jobs and services close by, that continues to upgrade the beauty of our natural surroundings, our rivers and our landscape.

You are the key. As Heraclitus said in 500 BCE: You can not step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing in. Nothing can stand in the way of hundreds of voices calling for change. Nothing we do in Oregon City happens without the support (and intense scrutiny) of citizens. Without you, we would not have permanent fire and EMS in Oregon City. Without you, 7th Street, Molalla Avenue, Washington Street, and the concept plans would look very different. Without the 90 citizen volunteers who make up our boards and commissions, this community would lose its voice, its richness, its uniqueness.

Thank you to all of you who contribute to the positive lifestyle we enjoy today in Oregon City. And please spend your federal Economic Stimulus check in Oregon City!

Change of direction: Today (Feb. 12th) is Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday:

President Lincoln said: “You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.”

Supplemental information:

Our Meals on Wheels program, operated out of Pioneer Community Center, served 24,593 meals to home bound seniors, 1008 meals to dogs and cats that live with home bound seniors through the animeal program, and 6398 meals to low income seniors at the center. We provided 10,864 rides to seniors in our community to Dr. appointments, shopping and recreational activities with 17,045 participants in organized activities at the center (trips, classes, meetings, rentals, in house services, and recreation)