

State of the City 2015

According to the Chinese zodiac, 2014 was the year of the horse. In Veneta, however, it was the year of the chicken. Last year, we joined most of our neighboring cities in recognizing the growing interest in and benefits of urban chicken keeping, allowing backyard chickens on lots smaller than one acre, and requiring a renewable three-year permit.

Because it had been three years since the council originally addressed the issue of backyard chickens, we held two work sessions to re-educate ourselves on the subject. Because a change in Veneta's chicken policy required an amendment to Veneta's land use code, both the City Council and the Planning Commission also solicited public testimony, the preponderance favoring backyard chickens. Eight chicken permits were issued in 2014.

One of the satisfactions of serving in local government is that my fellow Councilors and I most often deal with issues of this sort. Our decisions are not world altering, but they do have a direct effect on the lives of our residents, and, happily, partisan politics play no part in those decisions.

Much to our surprise, Oregon's legalization of medical marijuana dispensaries last year generated much less interest in Veneta than did backyard chickens. The Council did hold two public work sessions examining SB 1531 and debated the pros and cons of enacting a temporary moratorium on dispensaries within the city limits. Ultimately, we voted 3 to 2 against a moratorium. By state regulation, medical marijuana dispensaries may not be located within 1,000 feet of schools and we unanimously voted to include parks in that exclusion. To date, one dispensary has located in the West Lane Center and has operated without incident.

Of course, in November, Oregon voters legalized recreational marijuana, presenting a whole new set of challenges, not only to the state but also to local jurisdictions, many of whom, including Veneta, saw both a necessity and an opportunity for increased revenue. The ballot measure precludes local taxation on marijuana sales, but Veneta and many other cities and counties passed preemptive tax measures before the election, speculating that they may be enforceable. Veneta approved a 10% tax on recreational marijuana and 0% on medical. Now we await state regulations before determining any further action.

Predatory feral chickens are the subjects of science fiction, not to be feared in spite of Veneta's new chicken policy, but feral cats are a very real problem here. Thanks to an \$18,000 grant from PetSmart Charities, Veneta has been able to fast track our "Please Don't Litter" spay and neuter program. Thanks also to an active group of volunteers and partnerships with Willamette Animal Guild and Veneta Veterinary Hospital, 166 cats were altered in 2014. This has helped to reduce our population of feral cats, but the problem and the program will continue this year. Want to adopt a kitten? Call Teresa at City Hall!

The number of building permits increased for the second year in 2014, as did requests for land use information. Applegate Landing will begin construction of 48 new homes in the spring, and a new development, Madrone Ridge, will break ground in the same area.

Upgrading and maintaining Veneta's water system to meet the needs of a growing population and orderly development came with inevitable rate increases, but the good news last January was that water rates increased 3.5%, much lower than the anticipated 20% increase. Current

projections indicate annual rate increases of just 2% for the next several years, and a 5% reduction in the sewer base rate is still in effect.

Early in 2014, the Council formally adopted six goals to guide city activities for the near future. Changing focus from large construction projects like the water pipeline and the Fern Ridge Service Center, we asked city staff to develop a work plan addressing further development of our infrastructure, improving community health and safety, encouraging business development and enhancing communication and civic engagement.

It was a year of study and planning for Veneta, in preparation for decisions to be made and and/or work to begin in 2015, because, according to author H. Stanley Judd, “A good plan is like a road map: it shows the final destination and usually the best way to get there.”

In August, Public Works Director Kyle Schauer provided the Council with a comprehensive sewer infill report. We directed staff to proceed with an update of a 2009 engineer’s estimate for extending sewer service to an unserved section of East Bolton and with a preliminary engineering report to determine feasibility of sewer extension for the area of Eighth Street between Dunham Avenue and Sertic Road. A revised estimate for the East Bolton project was completed and the city is moving forward with that project. We expect to address the Eighth Street report in late March.

In October, we contracted for a pavement condition assessment of the city’s streets in order to develop a prioritized five-year maintenance and repair plan. The survey will also identify gaps in connectivity in Veneta’s street and sidewalk network. We expect the full report to come before the Council in early February.

Veneta became a HEAL City last year, joining the Healthy Eating Active Living Campaign which is jointly sponsored by the League of Oregon Cities and the Oregon Public Health Institute. Concurrent with council goals, the HEAL campaign promotes improvements in livability and community health. In September, Veneta was awarded a \$7,000 HEAL Cities grant to help fund a conceptual design and feasibility study for a multi-use path between Veneta and Elmira, that would provide a safe route to Elmira schools for Veneta residents, as well as access to Veneta goods and services for Elmira residents. The city has contracted with Branch Engineering for a study that will determine the next steps required and the cost to build the path.

Landscape design for the four corners intersection of Territorial and Highway 126 was completed in partnership with the Westside Garden Club, an improvement that we believe will be beneficial to the recruitment of new employers and businesses. Implementation by city staff and garden club volunteers at this gateway intersection of two state highways awaits approval by the Oregon Department of Transportation. The City expects to go out to bid for landscape improvements to the northwest corner in March.

The City contracted with the University of Oregon’s Community Planning Workshop, headed by Bob Parker, to conduct an Economic Opportunity Analysis and implementation strategy, critical to Veneta’s Comprehensive Plan update and identifying the City’s economic development goals for the next 20 years. A committee composed of the City Council, the Planning Commission and citizen stakeholders, including local business owner and resident Herb Vloedman, area resident Joan Mariner, Siuslaw Bank’s Jason Alansky, and developer Phil Velie participated in the process and will develop policy recommendations, strategies, and implementing measures to

address land deficits or other issues identified in the EOA. The report is due by mid-February with review and adoption to be completed by the Planning Commission and the City Council by late March.

Business development activity has definitely picked up in Veneta, particularly at the West Lane Center. First Call Resolution, now known as FCR, opened in February and now employs 250 associates. O'Reilly's opened a big new auto parts store. Ray's Food Place emerged from bankruptcy with an ambitious makeover still in progress and Hi-School Pharmacy and Hardware bought out both Tiffany's and Kelley's Hardware, relocating the pharmacy to Ray's. West Lane Fitness will relocate to West Broadway after extensive remodeling of the former Moose Hall.

Veneta opened a new bulk water station on Cornerstone Drive to provide a more convenient location with 24-hour access for bulk water customers.

Planting Veneta firmly in the 21st century, we have included broadband conduit as a city public improvement required for all new development, and successfully sought funding to extend broadband connectivity to the Cornerstone Business Park.

E permitting is now available to contractors enabling them to apply for and purchase all city building permits online, submit plans electronically and schedule inspections 24/7 online.

Does Veneta have a "brand?" Do we want one? We explored these and other questions regarding identity and economic development at a town hall meeting with internationally known place branding expert Bill Baker. After subsequent deliberation, public and council consensus was that a branding campaign for Veneta is premature, not to mention too expensive. We did determine that the City logo needs an update, now in progress, as well as a more user-friendly web site, soon to be unveiled. The conversation about branding will continue as the city grows and matures.

Another town hall meeting in October addressed public safety concerns previously brought before the Council. Ric Ingham, City Administrator, Sgt. Billy Halvorson, Veneta's contract sergeant, and Sgt. Carrie Carver, representing the Lane County Sheriff's Office, provided information and responded to questions regarding Veneta's contract with Lane County to provide police coverage for the city. Sgt. Carver also provided Neighborhood Watch materials and guidelines.

Public safety and community policing are top priorities for the Council, and, with the sheriff's office, we will establish a Community Policing Strategic Plan. We are fully supportive of one or more Neighborhood Watch groups for the community, and Sgt. Halvorson will answer questions and hear residents' concerns at the Fern Ridge Library at 1 pm on the last Saturday of each month. Responding to citizen inquiries, the Council has asked staff to explore alternatives to our current contract, including establishing our own police department.

Veneta loves to celebrate and we did a lot of it last year. The Fern Ridge Service Center's Harvest Festival was the biggest and most successful yet. Families flocked to the Park Board's annual Easter Egg Hunt. It rained on the Chamber's annual holiday tree lighting, but, for once, it didn't rain on the City's Light Parade, and it wasn't cold either!

Veneta Elementary and the Veneta Park Board teamed up once again to observe Earth Day/Arbor Day, and Veneta celebrated five years as a Tree City USA with a special program at the community center and a tree planting at Territorial Park.

The Veneta Community Pool had another great season. The Veneta Improvement Association initiated construction of Veneta's original swimming pool to provide a safe place for our children to learn to swim.

We're proud that swim lessons continue to serve that important purpose and, in fact, are a major source of revenue, accounting for 36% of total pool revenue in 2014.

The Pool hosted four special events this year. We partnered with Kiwanis for the Summer Solstice Party and a Family Fun Night. Both events featured games, prizes, music and food. For teens, the pool scheduled Night Waves and Night Waves II, featuring well-known DJ Barry McGuire and Xbox games on the City's 12-foot screen. The pool's third annual swim meet attracted competitors from throughout the area.

2015 will see implementation of much of last year's planning activity, including street repairs and sewer system expansion. Public safety enhancements will continue to be a major focus, including a stronger police presence in our parks and, we hope, formation of at least one Neighborhood Watch group.

ODOT'S safety improvements to Highway 126 are scheduled for 2016, and Veneta will continue to advocate for additional improvements and eventual implementation of the entire Fern Ridge Corridor Plan, including our multi-purpose path to Eugene.

An improving economy is spurring business interest in Veneta and the Fern Ridge School District's successful \$26.7 million bond measure will bring new construction dollars to the area, and major improvements to Veneta Elementary School, our partner in community events as well as the education and well-being of our children.

This year, Veneta's three-teacher second-grade team--Angie Pebworth, Corrine Messman, and Deanna Greene--were named VFW Teacher(s) of the Year by our local post and by VFW District 13 for their innovative and collaborative approach to citizenship education. That curriculum includes an annual visit to City Hall to learn about local government. This is something I personally am looking forward to this year because, believe it or not, sweet second graders see the Mayor of Veneta as a rock star.