



State of the City Address 2016

Mayor Sandra H. Larson

2016 follows a year of opportunity, accomplishment and progress in Veneta, but with opportunity often comes challenge.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Among the City Council's goals for 2015, enhancing public safety—specifically community policing, youth relations and code enforcement—continued to be the Council's top priority.

In January, our contract sergeant Billy Halvorson began hosting informal and well-attended monthly community meetings at the Fern Ridge Library, and in July we renewed our law enforcement contract with the Lane County Sheriff's Office, increasing Sgt. Halvorson from one-third to one-half time, providing him more time to focus on Veneta's contract and oversight of our contract deputies.

Deputies stepped up their patrols and engagement with youth at the skate park, as well as their morning presence in Veneta Elementary's school zone.

Recognizing the nexus between health and public safety, the Council enacted a ban on smoking in all city parks, for which second graders from both Veneta and Elmira gave us a thumbs up on their annual field trips to City Hall. In addition, we prohibited the possession of e-cigarettes by minors and their sale to minors.

Both the City and Lane County Sheriff's Office supported resumption of a local Neighborhood Watch Program, a proactive citizen response to concerns about property crimes, in particular, which has continued to grow in both numbers and effectiveness.

In October, this citizen group advanced a plan to form a special law enforcement district encompassing the communities of Noti, Elmira, Walton, Crow, Alvadore and Veneta and surrounding rural areas. Council and staff have devoted a lot of study to the proposal. Because Oregon law dictates that law enforcement districts can be formed only by counties, the City of Veneta has resolved to support Lane County's placement of the citizen-driven initiative on the May ballot and agreed to be included in the proposed district, believing that the proposal has merit and that voters within the proposed district's boundaries, including Veneta, should have the opportunity to decide whether or not it will be established.

The proposed district would eliminate the need for Veneta's separate law enforcement contract with the sheriff's office, while providing 24-hour deputy coverage for the Fern Ridge area. The sheriff's sub-station headquartering the force of eleven deputies (including one school resource officer) and a full-time sergeant will be located adjacent to Veneta City Hall. Formation of the district could help to ameliorate public safety and budget issues for both Veneta and Lane County.

Our city administrator has been working for well over a year with Lane County and Lane Fire Authority on an Emergency Operations Plan addressing local response to large-scale catastrophic events, including the predicted Cascade seismic cataclysm. Lane County secured Federal Emergency Management funds for development of a template that will be applicable to other small cities.

CODE ENFORCEMENT

Better code enforcement results in more livable and attractive communities. To that end, we turned our attention to three blighted properties in Veneta, all of which are no longer deemed hazardous. Staff and Council intend to continue to pursue abatement of blighted properties within the city.

A serious dog attack in the city prompted a review and revision of our dangerous animal ordinance, clarifying the definition of “dangerous animal” and providing more latitude to our code enforcement officer and municipal judge to impose restrictions based on the level of threat.

Thanks to Veneta’s dedicated Friends of Ferals volunteers, we met our second-year spay and neuter quota, and PetSmart Charities renewed Veneta’s “Don’t Litter” program grant. 281 formerly fecund feral felines were spayed or neutered over the two-year grant period.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The Council’s number two goal for 2015 was to advance our sewer system buildout in the serviceable area of the city. Veneta was incorporated 53 years ago primarily to provide clean, safe, water and modern, sanitary sewer services to residents. Last year, we came closer to completing the incorporators’ vision with construction of a sewer line along East Bolton Road between Applegate Court and Pine Street.

Veneta’s Public Works Department manages a network of 21.5 miles of asphalt, concrete and gravel streets within our city limits. Steps one and two in pursuing the Councils’s goal to improve and preserve those streets were completion of a pavement condition survey and adoption of a six-year pavement preservation plan with an estimated cost of \$3.4 million.

First repairing roads that are in fair condition rather than those in poor condition may seem counterintuitive, but in fact, it is more cost-effective to preserve them before they are critically deteriorated. The first round of work completed in September filled potholes and cracks, and patched and sealed 25 different street sections around town.

Council suspended consideration of a Transportation Utility Fee to fund the preservation plan pending the outcome of the Fern Ridge Community Policing District vote in May.

Sidewalk conditions were also surveyed, with the result that most of Veneta’s sidewalks are rated good to excellent. Of course, there are still major streets that lack sidewalks including 6th and 8th Streets, Hunter, and parts of Perkins.

Those same second-grade field trippers got a once-in-a-lifetime look into the cavernous interior of the city’s two-million gallon water reservoir when their visit to the public works yard coincided with preventative maintenance. The tank’s original 1978 interior coating was sandblasted to bare metal and recoated, preserving future water quality. They also heard the roar of McKenzie River water moving through the EWEB pipeline, the sole source of city water while the tank was off-line, so there was no disruption of service.

As projected, Veneta’s annual water rate increase was a moderate 2%. The sewer base rate continued at a 5% reduction, enacted in July of 2013.

GROWTH AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The best laid plans don’t always go awry. Following completion of a major update of our 208-page Comprehensive Plan, accomplished in record time with no legal challenges thanks to Community Development Director Kay Bork, and the adoption of a five-year economic development action plan, we believe that Veneta is poised to capitalize on a rebounding economy.

To that end, the Council reconvened Veneta's Economic Development Committee, appointing nine representatives of the local business community to help shape the plan's focus on business retention and expansion and recruitment of smaller, more professional businesses.

Rural Development Initiatives, a non-profit organization that supports rural communities as they work through challenging economic conditions, selected Veneta and The Dalles to pilot its Business Retention and Expansion Program at no cost to the City. Local businesses are invited to the program's kick-off on Jan. 28th at 6 p.m. at Our Daily Bread.

West Broadway said goodbye to Kelley's Hardware last year, but welcomed two new businesses. West Lane Fitness moved into the former Moose Lodge, a move the City helped to facilitate with Urban Renewal funds for facade improvements. Broadway Grill just missed its December 31 opening, but has since been thronged with local diners.

Building permits and business inquiries both were up, and three new subdivisions are in the planning stages for 2016.

Recognizing that fiber access is critical to today's businesses, the City pursued and won a \$20,000 Regional Fiber Consortium grant to extend our fiber buildout to the Veneta Business Park, to be accomplished this year.

COMMUNICATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Our ongoing drive to improve citizen awareness and understanding of issues before the city, as well as citizen participation in civic activity, is reflected in the City of Veneta Communication Plan, adopted last January.

Since then, we have updated our City logo and launched a new, more user-friendly website.

The plan recognizes the importance of social media in today's communication and commits the City to developing guidelines for effective and responsible use of it.

For several years, the City has joined the Oregon Mayors' Association in sponsoring an annual "If I Were Mayor" contest, encouraging young citizens to learn about the functions of local government and to think either inside or outside the box about ways to improve quality of life in Veneta. Last year, fourth-grader MacKenzie Corbett thought very much outside the box with her proposal to control marauding cats with squirt guns, and high school sophomore Riley Craig was rewarded for his creative video entry.

Supported by a generous grant from the Lane County Cultural Coalition, the Veneta Historical Advisory Committee partnered with Applegate Pioneer Museum to install a plaque at the museum honoring Veneta's founders Edmund Hunter and Charles Dunham, designed to further interest in and knowledge of Veneta's history.

MISCELLANEOUS

There are, of course, other activities and developments of significance that don't fall strictly under specific council goals.

In December, the Lane Area Commission on Transportation ranked our proposal for a bike/pedestrian path improving safety for all who walk or ride between Veneta and Elmira first of seven county-wide proposals. If approved by ODOT at the state level, construction could begin in the next three to four years.

Life in Veneta may not be all fun and games, but we have our share.

Veneta's community pool concluded another successful season that included water aerobics and swim lessons as well as a Summer Solstice Party, Night Waves for teens with deejay Barry MacGuire and a Family Fun Night.

For 23 years, the City has operated Zumwalt Campground, originally a response to illegal camping during the Oregon Country Fair. The popular venue, a money-maker for Veneta's parks fund and Mid Lane Cares, sold out again this year. Campers took time out from fair revelry to partner with the Friends of Zumwalt on their trail restoration project.

The heat was on when Veneta staff, aka the City Slickers, entered the Harvest Festival chili cook-off, but, alas, they did not win. Mid Lane's annual fund raiser to support the Fern Ridge Service Center is becoming a signature event for the city.

Veneta celebrated its sixth year as a Tree City USA with a celebration at the Veneta Community Center, featuring arborist Matt Horowitz and an apple cider pressing demonstration by Marion Lil of Apple Springs Organic Farm.

Lane Council of Governments named Veneta's nominee Tom Laing its Outstanding Citizen of the Year for his long service to his fellow veterans.

A year of opportunity, accomplishment and progress, yes.....and challenge.

We were certainly challenged as 2015 came to a tempestuous close with a sudden December storm that blew through Veneta on a wild and erratic path. Trees fell on houses and automobiles. Streets were blocked by fallen trees and debris. Veneta City Park lost 18 trees, some of them falling on the swing set and monkey bars.

In typical Veneta fashion, however, we weathered the storm. Best of all, no one was seriously injured in spite of some close calls.

There was also little or no damage to city facilities. The Community Center lost a few shingles but the pool building was unscathed, thanks to the timely removal of a large pine tree that threatened to fall on it.

Generators at the water and wastewater plant worked the way they were supposed to in the resulting power outages.

Public Works staff along with crews from EPUD and Lane Electric plus several stalwart community volunteers cleared streets and storm drains in record time, preventing flooding from more rain that came later in the day.

The annual holiday tree lighting was somewhat soggy, but it's Oregon, and we didn't let a little moisture dampen our celebration, especially our enjoyment of the sweet voices of the Veneta and Elmira Elementary School choirs.

And Mother Nature didn't rain on our holiday parade—much. Weather-defying families lined the streets for the 12th annual Fern Ridge Light Parade, and the rains held off almost to the end.

Speaking of challenges, if 2014 was the "year of the chicken" in Veneta, as I suggested in last year's State of the City, 2015 was the "year of the turkey." Flocks of them are roaming the city and their numbers were not reduced at Thanksgiving! We would suggest that kind hearted residents rethink their practice of feeding them because the fowl invaders will necessarily meet a cruel fate, eventually. "Eventually" is the key word, however, because Department of Fish and Wildlife limits the City to six kills at a time, and my husband recently counted 24 in just one of many flocks.

At least the breasts of harvested birds are donated to locations like the Eugene Mission, but our public works staff has the unenviable task of cleaning and preparing them.

THE YEAR TO COME

Many of the opportunities, accomplishments, progress and challenges of 2015 laid the groundwork for work still to be done. The Council reordered but did not significantly change its goals for 2016, except that we placed new emphasis on parks and recreation in support of healthy lifestyles.

In May, Fern Ridge residents will decide whether or not to establish the Fern Ridge Community Policing District. Either decision will present challenges for the City.

In addition, candidates for three of our five council seats, including the mayor, will be on the November ballot, as will a measure establishing a city tax on recreational marijuana.

We will turn attention to city sidewalks and retail licensing of tobacco, and Veneta's beloved Easter Egg Hunt will go green with biodegradable candy-filled eggs.

It's probably clear that the annual visit of second graders is a highlight of the year for me. They come to learn, but we also learn, as, like little barometers, they provide valuable insight into the attitudes of our residents as a whole. Last year, they told us that they see Veneta as a safe place with friendly people, naming their homes, school, library, pool, parks and Dairy Queen among their favorite places.

I look forward to reassuring this year's group that, even with the city's inevitable growth and change, Veneta will remain the family-oriented community that they know and love.