

The Independence City

INDEPENDENT

Price of Paving Goes Up As Streets Hit Rock Bottom

By Anne Scheck

Take a stroll in downtown Independence and you're likely to walk on the most expensive street in the city. That's because B Street, which links to Main, will take an estimated \$16,000 to fix. And B Street is one of many, bringing the predicted price tag for street maintenance and repair to \$8.3 million.

From 16th Street to Gun Club Road, some of the city's pavements sorely need treatment -- and if declines continue, refurbishment will become even more of a financial challenge, according to the Portland-based engineering company that surveyed Independence streets a year ago.

How could the tab for street rehabilitation climb so high? City streets are a municipal asset that "tends to perform well" for decades, explained John Duval, president and principal engineer of Pavement Services Inc., the civil engineering firm that conducted the study.

Protecting what transportation officials consider a city's major "asset" -- the network of paved roadways linking neighborhoods and businesses -- is a challenge for small cities because, in general, a lack of intense care poses no immediate serious hazard. But part of the answer lies in preservation, keeping streets categorized as "good" in

that condition, which requires far less money for rehabilitation in the long run, Mr. Duval said. In the case of Independence, such a strategy is recommended -- more than half of the streets in the 2015 "street census" by his firm were classified as "good."

City Councilor Tom Takacs, who had pressed for addressing the issue when the report was submitted to the City Council nearly a year ago, noted that it is "cheaper to keep those streets in good condition" by taking appropriate steps.

However, in the months since the report was given to the City Council, staff attention seems to have been taken up by other demands, ranging from projects such as a search for investors in Independence Landing, the planned development along the Willamette River in the city's downtown, to proposals by marijuana growers who want to establish businesses in Independence's industrial corridor along Stryker Road.

Asked after the last city council meeting about the lapse of time between the report and further action, Mr. Takacs said he believes the needs identified for street repair are being addressed in the budget process. *Continued on Page 2*

This year's budget for the city's transportation fund is about \$700,000, a sum that includes an estimated \$504,000 from the Oregon State Highway Fund and \$117,000 from a similar federal program. In addition, there is an inter-fund loan of \$100,000 that's transferred annually into the transportation fund, partly by tapping a portion of the city's General Fund.

Though system-development charges -- revenue tied to new construction -- can help defray the cost of street refurbishing, a future loan is likely, said Independence city finance director Gloria Butsch. "We are looking at all the options," she said, noting that the street-census report offers a list of funding alternatives, including a "street utility fee" to generate funds for pavement repair and refurbishment. Canby and Silverton have a \$5 utility fee for residents to maintain city streets, but neither Salem nor McMinnville do.

Eventually, the goal is to have a reserve -- or "fund balance" of 20% -- in the city's transportation coffers, a goal that seems far off but also within reach, given the current and improved economy, Ms. Butsch said.

The last time major street rehabilitation was undertaken by the city was 1996; Currently, Independence spends about \$100,000 annually on streets. However, at those levels, the total cost for maintenance and repair will increase to almost \$11 million in the next five years, according to forecasting by Mr. Duval and Pavement Services Inc. However, an annual expenditure of \$2 million over the next five years by the city would eliminate

the rehabilitation backlog for the entire street system.

The major source of funding for municipal street repair and maintenance is the State Highway Fund -- revenue that's generated by the state's 30-cent-a-gallon gas tax and fees from driver's licenses and vehicle registrations. A weight-mile tax imposed on trucks also goes into the fund. "All that comes into the pot," explained Paul Mather, Highway Division Administrator for the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). About a fifth is allocated to cities across the state to apply as they see fit, from paving roadways to building culverts to sweeping streets, he said.

But Oregon -- long a conservation-minded state -- has a population that, increasingly, is driving fuel-efficient automobiles, including electric vehicles and hybrid cars. And ubiquitous bicycle commuters in places like Portland and Eugene are growing in small towns, too -- like Independence. Elkay, a local cabinet manufacturer, reports 40% more bicyclists pedaling to work over the past five years.

As a result of less reliance on fuel, transportation officials are concerned about the way revenue is generated for state-wide road-building and repair: With people filling up the tank less often, gas-tax collection has flattened out, said Sonny Chickering, an engineer and regional manager with ODOT.

"On the whole, the available funding is not sufficient for increasing needs," Mr. Chickering said. Part of the solution may lie with a per-mile tax that

is currently being tested (See ‘The Civics Lesson’ on page 4). Till that time, however, street funding is likely to decline.

Deferred maintenance on streets is widespread in towns across the state, and Independence is no different than many cities that have allocated funds to other infrastructure services during the past recession. “I don’t think Independence is any worse off than many other cities,” observed City Councilor Takacs.

“Streets can be taken for granted” without serious consequences for many years, Mr. Duval agreed, noting that his firm’s findings may come as a surprise to those who travel the nearly 28 miles of Independence thoroughfares without perceiving any problem at all.

Potholes are easily patched and other features of deterioration -- like deep cracks -- may arise only after a long period of deferred maintenance, he explained. “But there is a certain shelf life,” he said, and the longer that such maintenance is delayed, the more costly it becomes.

The life span of streets is fairly easy to predict. A good-to-fair condition may last only five years or extend to 15. The difference largely depends on intervention. Also, deterioration rates can change with use, not simply age. Many cities with growth issues have to grapple with the fact that streets once considered low-need accelerate to higher need when residential areas become more utilized for new traffic.

Earlier this month, Corvallis residents were invited to give feedback for an update of that city’s new transportation system plan. At an open house, one of the most common

concerns was that traffic is now often diverting through neighborhoods as a result of congestion elsewhere.

The same worry has been expressed by citizens of Independence, at both City Council and Planning Commission meetings – as development continues with townhouses along Gun Club Road and new street-scaping commences for Independence Landing.

Meanwhile, administrators at ODOT have issued a warning that “there are storm clouds ahead for funding the system,” citing a revenue forecast last June. ODOT data persistently show that by 2020 fuel-tax revenue will begin a slow but continual downward trend “for every year into the future.”

If maintenance-and-repair needs that now loom for Independence city streets remain unfunded, the average measure of the health of most streets – currently ranked by a general “pavement condition index” of 71 – will plummet to 62. “The overall pavement condition of the streets in Independence is good,” according to the engineering report. But there are places along the lanes and boulevards of “advanced deterioration,” which may require “complete construction.”

Without tackling the problem soon, “it will become significantly more difficult to rehabilitate pavements in poor condition,” the report concludes.

■ *If you would like to determine how your street stacks up, you can consult the report by locating it at the Independence City website under the title “Implementation of a Pavement Management System, City of Independence Street Network”*

Note: *The Independent’s* next issue will look at evolving marijuana law

The Civics Lesson

Time Will Tell Whether Oregonians Will Go for the “OreGo” Plan ...

Increased fuel efficiency in cars may drive revenue from the gas-tax down, but the state’s elected officials are considering steering the fund toward a new revenue stream. In a program that assesses the distance traveled, rather than solely relying on how much gas is consumed at the pump, a per-mile fee is being tested by about 1,000 volunteers across the state. It’s called the “OREGo” plan, and scores of owners of cars like the Toyota Prius, the Subaru Outback and the Ford F-150 have signed up for this pilot program. Is a mileage-based fee that augments or replaces the gas tax a better way to go – both literally and figuratively? Oregon is the first to try to answer that question, though other states are now following. This approach could replenish declines in money for street and road repair that are expected to dip by 2020, explained Tom Fuller, Communications Section Manager at the Oregon Department of Transportation. “We think this is a solution,” said Mr. Fuller, who has chronicled the progress in blogs and videos. The testing is all very scientific: surveys from participants and data from automotive tracking technology can be found at <http://www.myorego.org/-end->

The Indy Hop

What’s in a name? That question famously has been asked by poets – and picky new parents, of course. But it’s also a common inquiry by Independence residents who have not figured out how to pronounce the name of a street on one of the city’s most charming cul-de-sacs, Kbel Yliniemi. As a result, residents nearby have dubbed it “the horseshoe neighborhood” for its distinctive U-shape and proximity to a farm field. It’s home to Carole Bova-Rice, who has a fool-proof way to say it right. Her dentist helpfully described the way the family for which it’s named pronounces it: Kay-bell IL-a-Neemie. Yliniemi stands for their surname; Kbel represents the initials of four children. The family clinched the right to name the street by buying it as part of a local fundraiser. Residents of the half-circle of houses of Kbel Yliniemi take pride at the name, which may make the street unique in all the world. According to the US Census Bureau, no common street name in a list the agency compiles even includes any street that even begins in the letter Y, although Yamhill is on the list of those that do appear in -- *where else?* -- the Pacific Northwest. (*Anne Scheck*)
