



Town of Cathlamet

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MEMORANDUM

February 28, 2012

To: Council Members

From: George Wehrfritz, Mayor

Subject: State of the Town Report

As required by state law, I submit the following State of the Town report for Council review.

Cathlamet

State of the Town Report, 2012

The coming months will be transformative for Cathlamet. Several public works projects long on the drawing board have started recently or will soon get underway. The most important: a new wastewater treatment plant budgeted at almost \$9 million. Once this facility is operational (target date: Sept. 24, 2013), we will take a failing waterfront sewage plant offline and begin redevelopment of about five acres of prized in-town waterfront – the ideal outcome being a major marina expansion. We are also embarking on the adaptive reuse of our old fire hall into an expanded library, a community center and the Town's first dedicated records archive; a downtown lighting project; and major repaving on Third Street near the marina.

A Building Year

Not since the 1960s have works of such magnitude been undertaken in Cathlamet. I expect they will catalyze new economic activity, improve quality-of-life for Town residents and meet the long term needs of our community. We have already met arduous funding challenges; looking ahead, the pressure is on to execute these and other projects with precision. To that end, we have begun to implement reforms aimed at improving performance, accountability and efficiency in critical town departments.

Two are worth noting here.

- **Town Hall** will officially open its doors in the Scarborough Building on March 1, 2012. A “soft-opening” happened last week. The office’s efficient layout, additional space and modern amenities support the accounting challenges projects like the wastewater treatment plant impose. We also see the new space as an opportunity to improve our services to the public, to the Town Council and to the various Town departments that rely on us for support.
- **Public Works** is undergoing a major restructuring. A leadership transition has begun and is proceeding smoothly. Our objectives are to maintain and enhance management of the water and sewer facilities – both of which are critical to public health and safety. We also aim to better manage and maintain other public buildings, parks and roadways. This will require a department that is more efficient, can marshal resources more productively and cooperates fully with other agencies. I believe it is within the department’s grasp to attain such performance standards without increasing headcount.

Reform Works

We know that to be true because reforms already implemented are having a positive impact at the Cathlamet Fire Department. Two years ago, questions about CFD fuel card management brought a variety of problems to light; after a lengthy inquiry, the State Auditor’s Office cited several shortcomings in two audit findings delivered in Sept. 2011. The SAO’s ruling was contentious, to be sure. But it must also be viewed as an inflection point in the CFD’s history –one that marks the beginning of necessary change.

Some examples:

- A new fueling policy for the CFD/EMS has reduced monthly *unleaded* fuel consumption from a historical average of about \$350/month to less than one tenth that amount. Total CFD fuel consumption in 2011 was just \$6,996.57, representing 4% of departmental expenditures. In 2008, total departmental fuel consumption was \$12,954.10, representing 11% of expenditures.
- A new EMS billing policy – implemented to put all EMS accounting under the control and oversight of the Town’s clerk-treasurer – has aligned the CFD with accounting norms practices in municipalities across the state, addressing concerns raised by the SAO.
- A draft ordinance (548-12) which I expect will become law in March, will place the CFD firmly under the Town’s control for the first time since its establishment in 1932. Specifically, it mandates that senior department command reports directly to the mayor, and that all CFD policy decisions are made by the Town Council. My expectation is that 548-12 will lead to a period of greater cooperation, effective resource allocation and mutual respect – all of which will translate into superior firefighting and ambulance services for the community.

Belt-Tightening and Growth

Our local economy remains sluggish. One result is that revenues garnered by the Town – including sales taxes, licensing fees and such – remain flat or declining. In late 2011 the Town Council passed my second budget as mayor, and again approved a significant cut

to total spending from the all-important current expense fund. Unlike 2010, when we had to dip into reserves to cover spending for that year, most departments came close to their budget targets in 2011 and lived within their means. That being said, the town operates on thin margins, and to increase reserves over time the Town Council approved a hike in the utilities tax from 3% to 6% in late 2011 – a tax increase that is being implemented now.

It is tempting to blame the poor local economy on events beyond our control. But a better strategy would be to examine what local factors we can change to boost local commerce. We have done so already with the Library/Community Center project, which is rooted in the idea that inspired public spaces boost economic activity in the communities that build them. Improved walkability, the rise of a vibrant new Community Garden in Erickson Park and Main Street beautifications that include new streetlights all will contribute further.

But there is more to be done. A year ago I called for a “broad-spectrum economic strategy” for growth and development in Cathlamet – one that included strategies outside the traditional boundaries of tourism promotion. Tourism is certainly an important economic driver, though we must recognize that it’s seasonal, cyclical (meaning it reacts sharply to the ups and downs of the regional economy) and already well-developed here. Assuming that the community’s effective tourism promotions continue, the challenge is to devise *other strategies* that will also contribute to economic growth in Wahkiakum County.

The basic questions are these: what businesses might succeed on Main Street by serving the year-round needs of Wahkiakum County’s 4,000 residents? And what can local government do to encourage the private sector to create and sustain such businesses? Since 2010 we have identified through a comprehensive survey of local consumers a list of their wants and needs. We have also seen the rise of a local Main Street Merchants’ Group that shares ideas and coordinates promotions; that group recently voted to work within the Chamber of Commerce structure as an independent committee.

I believe it is critical that the Town encourage new businesses that cater to practical needs, and urge everyone who calls Wahkiakum County home to spend a bit more of their disposable income here. We can’t rely solely on a “Please Shop Local!” sign on Main Street, because far more money exits our community en route to Wal-Mart and Costco every year than enters with visiting fishermen, yachtsmen or campers.

Several approaches are worth considering. New business creation would expand the variety of goods and services available locally. Encouraging building owners to make improvements and charge realistic rents would help fill vacant storefronts. A joint marketing effort that lays out what Main Street currently offers – combined with coordinated shopping promotions, say – could win back shoppers who now do most of their buying outside Wahkiakum County. Such efforts could be successful with no ill-

effect on the seasonal tourism trade, resulting in a bigger economic pie for local businesses to share.

The Town's role in all this is clear: we can improve infrastructure, keep the Town cleaner and support activities that reintroduce residents to the services Main Street provides. We also should encourage the Chamber of Commerce (with dollars as well as ideas) to create a long-term buy local/live local campaign to promote downtown merchants as a distinct group and to recognize that doing so does not conflict with its existing development agenda.

A Hub for Healthy Living

I want to end this year's report with an idea – one I call the “health hub.” The objective: to develop an underused resource in our community – Erickson Park – as a place that promotes health and wellness. To some extent, this is already happening in Cathlamet, as evidenced by the 2011 walkability report that identified the park as an important hub for local walking trails, and the community garden's success in drawing local gardeners (and impressive development resources) to the park. For years, volunteers have also gathered regularly to weed the park's flowerbeds, and the school has contributed to park maintenance through its ongoing outdoor programs.

In 2012 the Town Council could be asked to consider several additional aspects of the “health hub” concept, including:

- A proposal to host a permanent local food bank in the park, built to bring together the two local food banks into one modern, purpose-built facility.
- A grant application to seek planning funds for a “Cathlamet trail” linking the upper Town around St. James Family Center to Main Street and the marina.
- Programs to create art in Erickson Park, including outdoor sculpture, murals and a “free wall” for graffiti.

The park's location, size and beauty make it a natural focal point. Not just for those seeking exercise, the rewards of kitchen gardening or an outlet for healthy artistic expression, but also for households dependent on food assistance. The park is therefore central to the broader mission we have to enhance small town life in Cathlamet. Doing so would improve livability in this community, engage local youth in productive and educational pursuits, boost volunteerism and support the most vulnerable households here.

Sincerely,



George Wehrfritz,
Mayor,
Town of Cathlamet