

Hwy 3 widening costs go up

By ARLA SHEPHARD
MASON COUNTY LIFE

The Belfair Water District plans to divide its pipeline replacement project along Highway 3 into two separate projects because of unforeseen costs.

The state Department of Transportation requires the water district to replace 8,000 feet of linear pipe beneath Highway 3 due to the state's impending widening project along the same stretch of highway in Belfair.

Other utilities, including Mason County Public Utility District No. 3, Cascade Natural Gas and CenturyLink,

have already moved their utility poles and wires out of the state's right of way.

However, the water district has run into problems because of the cost of the project — the district had obtained a \$1.9 million Public Works Trust Fund loan, but the lowest bid for the project came out at \$2.4 million.

"It's been a real struggle," said Tom Peadon, Belfair Water's general manager, at a Mason County Commissioners meeting in Belfair Tuesday night. "We cannot award a bid when we don't have the money for it."

The water district has decided to segment the project, focusing first on replacing

the pipe from Sweetwater Creek near Belfair Elementary to Romance Hill Road.

The district has applied for a Department of Health Drinking Water State Revolving Fund loan that could award the district another \$1.5 million to complete the project from Romance Hill Road to Cokelet Lane near Kitsap Bank.

"It's a tough project because there are utilities all up and down that highway," Peadon said. "We've had a few issues with DOT, but for the most part we've worked congenially."

The district awarded the bid to Port Orchard construction firm Pacific Coast

General LLC, which began work Tuesday and plans to finish by Nov. 15 on the first segment of the project.

The district is replacing its aging asbestos cement (AC) 8-inch diameter pipe with a 12-inch diameter ductile iron pipe, per the request of the DOT for safety reasons, Peadon said.

Once the entirety of the new pipe is put in, the district will pay DOT to remove the old pipe. The new pipe should last 100 years, Peadon added.

The district raised rates 38 percent in October 2012 and 15 percent this year in order to make loan payments on the project, but does not plan to raise rates much higher to pay for the increased project costs, Peadon said.

"Our plan is to only increase 2 percent annually over the next five years, as laid out in our capital plan," he said. "We're hoping to be able to make our loan payments. I believe we're going to be able to make that payment now without raising our rates."

Belfair Water District Commissioner Mike Pope said he believed the district might qualify for loan forgiveness if it obtained the Department of Health loan.

"That's what they've told us because our rates are some of the highest in the state for only 500-plus customers," Pope said. "We were forced into this because of the widening, yet the rates affect only a few customers (of the widening). We wish we could be spend-

ing that money on a system-wide upgrade."

The widening project is on the shelf now until utilities complete their projects, said DOT Project Engineer Karen Boone.

"We're looking at a March timeframe to let contracts go out, with a start in mid-May to June of next year," she said. "It might take two construction seasons."

Work on the widening will take place mostly at night, and any day construction will require two open lanes of traffic at all times, Boone added.

For more information on the Belfair Water District, call the district at 275-3008. For more on the Highway 3 widening, visit www.wsdot.wa.gov/projects/sr3/belfair-improvements. ■

Port to manage Theler Center

By ARLA SHEPHARD
MASON COUNTY LIFE

The Port of Allyn is looking into managing the Mary E. Theler Community Center in Belfair, port officials revealed at an All Ports meeting Oct. 1 in Allyn.

Representatives from the Mason County ports of Allyn, Dewatto, Grapeview, Hoodsport and Shelton met to discuss ongoing projects and developments in their respective districts, as well as consider economic development strategies countywide.

Port of Allyn commissioner Judy Scott shared the history of the Theler community center with other port officials and acknowledged that the Port of Allyn has

long thought about increasing its presence and investment in Belfair, which is part of the port district.

The North Mason School District owns the Theler center, which until June had been managed by a nonprofit board and director. The school district took over Theler's management because board members discovered the center's funds had been mismanaged.

"The port is very interested in helping out the school district and taking over Theler," Scott said. "Those aren't the right words, but we're working on getting as much information as we can from the school board."

Port of Allyn commissioners Scott Cooper and Jean Farmer added that were the port to take over Theler's

management, it would keep Theler as a community center, but add more programs and opportunities for business development, a primary port mission.

"As a municipal taxing organization, I thought we were in the perfect position to step up," Cooper said. "We've let it be known that we want to help Theler."

The port's proposal would be one that would go before a citizens advisory committee tasked by the school board to advise Superintendent Dana Rosenbach on the issue of what the board should do with Theler.

In other news, the Port of Grapeview applied for a \$560,000 state Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) grant to fund a boat ramp project and

ADA-compliant restroom near the port's property at the Fair Harbor Marina in Grapeview.

"If we don't find funding, we'll have to go to Plan B, but we don't have a Plan B," said Port of Grapeview commissioner Glenn Carlson. "Two years ago, we went out for the same money and it didn't go so well."

The Port of Hoodsport is primarily involved in maintaining and tracking usage of the public restroom it installed next to the Hood Canal IGA in Hoodsport, while the Port of Dewatto is working on obtaining state property to create a boat launch and parking lot, which it would maintain in addition to its campgrounds on the Tahuya peninsula.

John Dobson, executive director of the Port of Shelton, shared news of the port's dealings with several

applications for recreational marijuana producing and processing businesses on port property.

The first of those applications to go through is for M&R Distributing at the port's property near Sanderson Field. The recreational marijuana producer is expected to bring 100-120 jobs to Shelton and \$4.5 million in revenue in its first 60 days, Dobson said.

"We have another four

companies that have signed leases in the Johns Prairie industrial park, and we're expecting another three more," he said. "It was a difficult decision to go down this road, but I think we've made a great choice."

The Port of Shelton is also working on a grant with Simpson Lumber and the Squaxin Island Tribe to create a new restoration area near the Oakland Bay Marina in Shelton. ■

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