

# Paving the way to fixing roads

With funding in jeopardy, county will be gauging public support for roads upkeep

By KEN O'TOOLE  
Headlight-Herald Staff

TILLAMOOK — In November 1999, 64 percent of Tillamook County voters resoundingly defeated a five-year levy that would have gone toward improving county roads. Now, with the potential for Road Department layoffs and curtailed operations, some are thinking it may soon be time to try again.

Perhaps by next May, according to Public Works Director Liane Welch.

Faced with the uncertainty of renewed federal Safety Net funding, which over the past dozen years has provided substantial funding for County Public Works — most recently, about \$1.8 million annually — Welch has been paring back and consolidating department operations.

The Safety Net funding that has been provided in lieu of revenue from federal timber har-

---

**'There aren't a lot of options.'**

— LIANE WELCH  
County Public Works Director

---

vests, ended last fall. Attempts by Oregon's congressional delegation to restore the funding are still inconclusive.

Four Public Works positions have gone unfilled in the next fiscal year budget, and Welch herself has taken on additional duties to help fill the gap.

What's more, she said, only about 3 miles of county roads will be able to be paved in the next fiscal year, she said.

She has also projected that without Safety Net funding or



Tillamook Public Works employees from the south district in Cloverdale received help from the central district in Tillamook to remove trees within the right-of-way along the Cape Lookout Road recently. Bucking a red alder is Mike Wynands, while equipment operator Mel McDonald assists. Other employees on the ongoing project include Grant Graves, Jim Reiff, Bill Beachy and Greg Gass. As the trees within the right-of-way grow, branches shade the road. By cutting them back, it permits sunlight to dry the road for safer travel during frost and ice, as well as prevents branches coming in contact with large trucks and RVs.

BOB REED/FOR THE HEADLIGHT-HERALD

See ROADS, Page A12

# ROADS: It comes down to priorities

Continued from Page A1

replacement revenue, by the 2008-09 fiscal year, there may be no more overlay work and no money to provide the county's portion for match-fund projects.

Putting the paving schedule in perspective, Welch explained, "Under typical conditions, overlaying a paved road at least every 20 years is a good practice. With 280 miles (of paved county roads), ideally we should be overlaying about 14 miles per year.

The department will try to concentrate on roads with the highest daily traffic counts, considering the factors of public safety and roads "that will absolutely fail if they're not fixed," she said.

Although paving costs are still rising, a recent calculation shows that asphalt costs alone for a mile of road amount to nearly \$66,000, according to Welch.

## Layoff possibilities

In the next fiscal year — "probably sooner" — the department could be faced with eliminating another 12 positions, Welch said. This would reduce total department staffing down to somewhere between 12 and 15 individuals, she said.

Public Works' staffing level was at 50 in 1980, Welch said, at 42 in 1996, and is now at 30, with the four vacant staff positions.

Other cutback possibilities, Welch said, include mothballing North and South County maintenance stations, and dealing with all county roads from the Central County District in Tillamook.

The cutbacks will have an impact not only on public safety, but also the department's ability to respond to storm damages, she said.

It's all a matter of what Public Works services the public expects, and will be willing to support, according to Welch.

"There aren't a lot of options," she said, explaining that "property taxes do not pay for the transportation system in Tillamook County." Further, the trend is toward less federal support for local roads, she added, "and the state is struggling, too."

## Brainstorming for options

Welch has been working on coming up with "sustainable options," along with the County Road Advisory Committee, the county commissioners and the county management team (comprised of various departmental managers).

During a commissioner workshop on road issues in January, Commission Chair Mark Labhart suggested a few options for funding, saying, "I think we need a concerted effort to ask the citizens: Are they satisfied with the roads now? If not, what would they recommend to



BOB REED/FOR THE HEADLIGHT-HERALD

**Grader operator Mel McDonald grades 2-inch rock on Chance Road during conversion of a portion of it to a gravel road surface. Assisting is Public Works employee Bill Beachy. Part of Makinster Road has also been selected to be converted to a gravel surface.**

improve our county roads?"

Among efficiency options that should be discussed, he said, are not only staffing reductions, but also whether some department work could be contracted out to private operators, and whether some paved roads could revert to a gravel surface.

Reverting paved roads to gravel is already taking place, Welch said this month, noting that a pothole-riddled portion of Chance Road had been torn up, its pavement ground up and turned into a graveled surface.

One funding option looms large.

This would call for seeking voter approval of a road levy to get roads up to standards, then ultimately seeking voter approval for a countywide road district to support ongoing maintenance.

The state of county roads amounts to an emergency, according to Welch.

As she put it, "In the next five years, if we don't fund it, our transportation system will deteriorate."

Additional suggested options from the public and the Road Advisory Committee include:

- A county fuel tax. This, of course, is shadowed by recent jumps in the pump price of gasoline, which may make this option a hard-sell to the public.
- Using the United Way approach of seeking public donations for Public Works.
- Establishing street/road maintenance improvement fees, system charges, utility permit fees and increases in fees currently collected.

## A matter of priorities

Meanwhile, Public Works operations will come down to prioritizing, which calls for a focus on keeping water off the

roads, cleaning ditches and culverts and rebuilding gravel shoulders. Also important, Welch said, will be cutting back roadside vegetation to not only keep roads dry, but to also contribute to motorist safety and sight distance.

Welch has pointed out the need for efficiencies and revenue enhancements sufficient to achieve an ideal roads maintenance level, or what is called a Pavement Condition Index (PCI), over a specified period of time.

A PCI of 80-plus is considered "good," according to Welch, who has explained that 100 PCI is "excellent," up to 65 PCI is "fair," and up to 25 is "very poor." She estimated the county roads' PSI at 51, but said it may actually be lower than that.

An Association of Oregon Counties survey indicates that Tillamook County may have the worst PCI in the state, Welch said.

## Discussions will continue

Public discussions on county roads funding will continue in an attempt to gauge public support for funding options, according to county commissioners.

As Commissioner Tim Josi said at the January roads workshop, "We'll all have to pay for our roads. We're already losing our investment (in county roads)." In addition, he noted, "we're already underfunded because the (state) gas tax has not been raised since 1991."

The state of the county's road system is everyone's concern, according to Welch, noting, "This system is their system."

Putting it another way, she said, "The transportation system impacts the community's livability, safety and economy."