

A new district down the road

BY KEN O'TOOLE
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TILLAMOOK — The county has the dubious distinction of being ranked No. 1, with the worst roads in Oregon, according to a statewide assessment.

The precarious status of federal Safety Net funding, dedi-

cated to county road maintenance, that has been received annually since 2000 in lieu of timber harvests on federal forest lands has placed the future of county roads in jeopardy. At this point, funding, which has been at \$1.8 million annually in recent years, was renewed for

one more year, but is set to expire in 2008.

With all that in mind, the county has begun a process that, with voter approval, could ultimately lead to funding a countywide service district for roads.

It's a step-by-step process.

County commissioners signed an order July 25, initiating a countywide roads district, and set a public hearing for Aug. 29, 9:30 a.m., at the Commissioners Meeting Room at the Courthouse. A second public hearing is set for Sept. 26, 9:30 a.m. Barring unforeseen

developments, an order would then be signed, forming the roads district that would include all areas in the county outside of the incorporated cities.

By the Aug. 29 hearing, the county may have determined the tax rate that would be sub-

mitted to the voters in May, according to Paul Levesque, management analyst.

"We'll get public input on this amount (at that time)," said Commissioner Charles Hurliman.

Nov. 22 is the deadline for

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filing a ballot measure with the county clerk for a permanent tax rate, to be on the May 20, 2008, ballot.

"We have to do this," said County Commissioner Tim Josi. "It's their (county taxpayers) investment. We have an ethical obligation to take this to the voters."

He added, "If they say no, then so be it. We'll end up with gravel roads throughout the county — and we may not have the capacity to maintain them even in a gravel state."

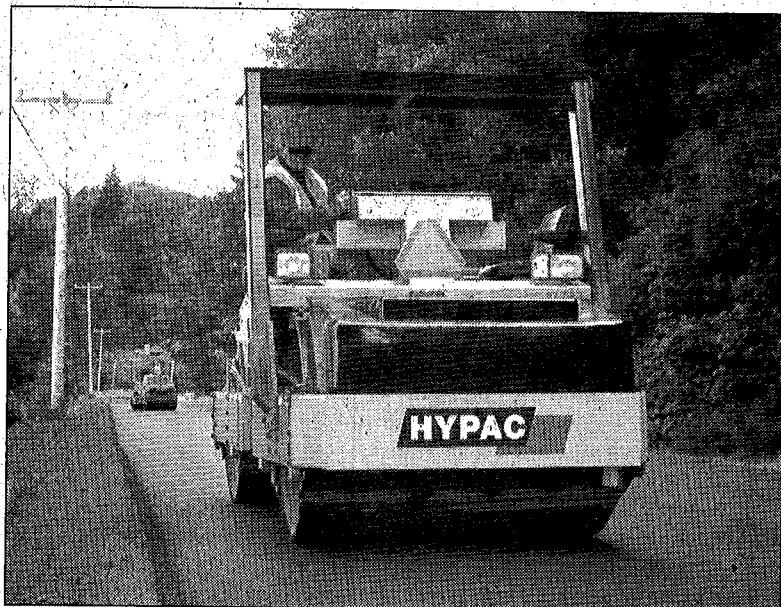
Commission Chair Mark Labhart took a similar stance last month when he supported formation of the road district.

As he put it, "The citizens expect that we provide leadership."

Hurliman, adding his support, observed that Public Works Director Liane Welch, through efficiencies in her department, has showed voters "their money is being spent wisely."

A property tax for roads failed in the late 1990s, and has not been levied in the county since the 1950s, according to county officials. They point out that state law prohibits use of county general fund property taxes from being spent on roads or bridges.

"The county is in the position of not being able to increase its permanent tax rate to use money for roads," said Levesque. "We are prevented

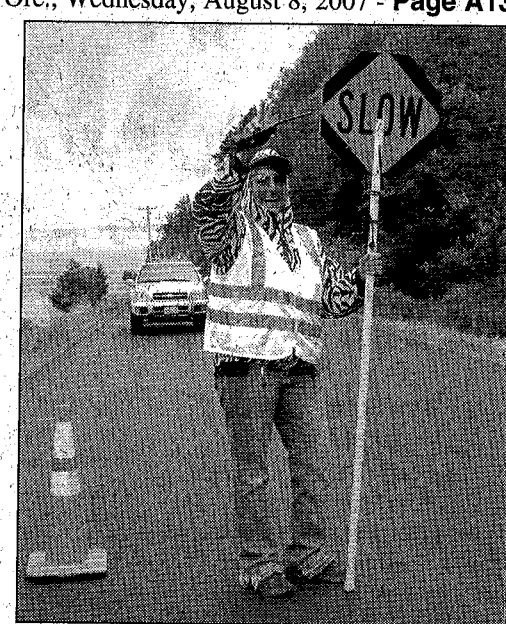


BOB REED/HEADLIGHT-HERALD PHOTOS

Public Works employee Bob Malo, north district, operates a roller vibrator to compact the asphalt on Bayocean Road.



Placing temporary highway centerline markers is Mike Wynands, south district.



Dena Smith enjoys her vehicle-flagging job.

constitutionally from going to the voters for an increase in the tax rate. So this (road district levy proposal) is our only option."

Other than the federal Safety Net funding (comprising 42.7 percent of the road fund budget) set to expire in 2008 — with further renewal expected to be either nonexistent or, at best, reduced in amount — county road funds are otherwise made up from about 6 percent from local fees, with revenue from the state's gasoline tax making up much of the balance of the road fund. However, the gas tax has not been increased since 1993.

It takes about a penny a year in gas tax increases to keep up with inflation, Josi said, "so you

can imagine where we are."

The county should be paving 20 miles a road per year, Josi pointed out, but "we're doing 8," he said. He noted that the county roads have a Condition Pavement Index of 48, compared to the acceptable standard of 80.

"When the roads reach a certain state," he said, the base is lost, and you have to repair the whole road."

The staffing level at county Public Works also depends on secure funding. According to Welch, staffing last year was at 31. It's at 27 now, and if funding is not secured, the level will be at 14 employees.

As for the tax rate that would be sought, Josi said, "When we calculate the tax rate, we're

County at half-way point on overlays

TILLAMOOK — The Tillamook County Public Works is midway through the 2007 summer asphalt overlay program and last week saw work on the Bayocean Road to Cape Meares and the Three

Capes Scenic Route.

The asphalt overlay crew is made up of employees from each of the three road districts including north, central and south. The overlay project began in the north district

where 1.7 miles was completed and moved to the larger central district where 4.1 miles of overlay is planned.

The project will conclude with 2.4 miles in the south district.

assuming the Safety Net is going away, and that the Legislature will eventually increase the gas tax or help local governments. The bottom line is that we'll ask for something we think is reasonable — it won't be the Cadillac version."