

## Mayor Hampton: State of the City 2009

What was on the mind of the voters in the November 2009 election? Change. And at all levels of government we have seen change, including the makeup of this city council. But the citizens have also experienced another form of change—a severe downturn in the economy. This is not good news for our world, our country, our state or our city. With our county’s unemployment rate nearing 10%, what impact might this have on our city operations? At a previous city council meeting Mr. Dean Phillips expressed concern about some of the City’s monthly or yearly expenses. Currently, these expenses are covered by tax money we receive. But as we approach the next budget cycle, we will have to be top-notch predictors of the amount of tax money that we expect to receive—tax collections will obviously go down with this downturn in the economy. And we are required to have a balanced budget.

Now in other areas of our life, when we experience a weakening economy, we expect that some businesses will be providing fewer services. For example, Lane Transit District is making some reductions in its services based upon expectations that its revenue will decrease. Or a store might be cutting its hours of operation or the services that it provides.

But I don’t think that people expect city government to cut its services, no matter what revenues we expect. Can you imagine the uproar if we announced that the police department would be operating on Monday, Wednesday and Friday only. And that our ambulance service would be responding on even days only, with fire trucks available on the odd days? Or that Greenwaters Park would remain closed for the next fiscal year?

Thanks to the efforts of the City staff, 2008 was a productive year in each department. When a citizen now enters City Hall, two new things are apparent. First, security has been increased. Second, the City now has broken into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the upgrading of computer software for recordkeeping and bill paying. Citizens now have several options for paying water/sewer bills. And new electronic equipment now allows city staff to process billings “in house.” Along with the billings which citizens receive, the City now provides a monthly newsletter—something that this Council has wanted for a long time.

In the area of economic development, Oakridge’s UPBEAT program has won three awards this year—The League of Oregon Cities’ Award of Excellence; the Oregon Economic Development Association’s Rural Community Revitalization Award; and the Lane Council of Governments’ Economic Enhancement Award. The City continues to work with numbers of businesses interested in locating in this area and continues to make improvements to the Oakridge Industrial Park.

Oakridge now has a functioning Parks, Trails and Tree Board to help us decide how to use our many park properties. And we may soon be designated a Tree City USA town.

A new one million gallon water reservoir now sits atop the ridge, enhanced by a new pump station and chlorine contact chamber, telemetry system and well field controls.

The sale of the “old” city shop property on Highway 58 has allowed the City to begin construction of a new city shop at the Industrial Park. And Ash Street and the associated storm drains were reconstructed at the same time.

Soon the Dead Mountain Radio Site will be upgraded to make it more reliable and allow numerous agencies to talk to each other on the same frequency—thanks to new radio equipment. The police department replaced four patrol vehicles at a cost of about \$5500 each. And we once again have a fully-certified narcotics dog—both for our own use and to be “borrowed” by other agencies. But perhaps the biggest impact on law enforcement in Oakridge was the hiring of a prosecutor; no longer can violators just ignore court appearances or the paying of fines.

Our fire department continues to be the leader in benevolent activities. It conducted its annual Fill the Boot program for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, sponsored the Toys for Tots program and helped deliver senior baskets at holiday time. The department continues to upgrade the skills not only of the paid staff but also of the volunteers.

Between the staff and volunteers, the fire department spent 6500 man hours working on emergencies. In man hours, that’s 270 days of service protecting the community.

So what challenges do we look forward to in 2009? As I mentioned earlier, we will face a financial challenge. What can we do to operate more efficiently? I have recommended before that I think that this City needs to bid several goods and services. For example, it should be easy to figure out how much propane this city uses in a year and bid this to the several regional companies which furnish this product. The same is true of gasoline use. And could we figure out how many vehicle oil changes we pay for in a year and bid this out, also. Of course, we could. Now this is not to say that there are not examples of cost-saving efforts going on right now. But I think that we will have to increase these efforts and create a climate among all city employees of the importance of saving money.

With our new city software system in the administration department, we should be able to move to an invoice system, so that expenditures can be approved in advance and can be tracked more easily.

Our second big challenge this year will be how to deal with air quality issues. I am not denying that we have air quality problems that need attention during the winter months. However, two major changes need to be made. If a household claims financial hardship, the City should be allowed to examine that household’s previous Federal Tax form before granting an exemption. If a household claims that wood heating is its sole source of heat, the City should conduct a visual inspection of the house before granting the exemption.

The second thing that we need to do in the home wood heating area is to make certain that the readings for this community comply with the Federal Clean Air Act. In my

opinion, the location of LRAPA's monitoring site does not comply with this law. And because of this problem, our air quality readings make things look worse here than they should. We need to be willing to pursue this effort legally, if necessary. More on this later in the meeting.

Our city has been "looked over" by a couple of different outside groups in the last several months. Over and over again we hear that our location and natural beauty are our greatest assets. Does city government have a role in protecting these assets? I believe so.

It's always more spectacular to build a new road than it is to fix potholes in an existing road. The building of the new road is "development." The repair of the existing road is improving the "quality of life." I would like to ask the city council and the staff to give at least equal credence to development issues and to quality-of-life issues. So when we install new street lighting (development), we also consider its impact on the environment (quality of life). I urge the City staff to keep abreast of the many proposed economic stimulus programs proposed by the state and federal governments. Right now this is like trying to sight in on a moving target, but perhaps some of this money could be used to repair much of our aging infrastructure and/or replace some outdated emergency response equipment.

Over and over again I hear of people traveling to Oakridge or through Oakridge who are struck by the attractiveness of the area. So while tourism isn't the only item in our economic development plan, its importance can never be overestimated.

Over the past 41 years which I have lived in this area, I've seen the resilience of the people here when it comes to experiencing hard times. Our President has asked us to become a nation of increased volunteerism to deal with the current economic crisis. I'm calling on the citizens of Oakridge to reassess how much time they can spend volunteering in a number of capacities to assist those less fortunate, who are going to be impacted the most during this period of hard times. I'm confident that we will weather this economic "perfect storm" and emerge even stronger on the other side. Thank you.