**Mayor Cutchen’s 2024 State of the City Address**

Delivered during the 1/4/2024 Oakridge City Council meeting

Video of the speech is available at: [***www.youtube.com/@cityofoakridgecouncilcommi8088***](http://www.youtube.com/@cityofoakridgecouncilcommi8088)

First, I would like to wish all the citizens of Oakridge a happy 2024. While 2023 was a productive year for the city, there is much more to do in the coming year. Before I get to those challenges, I would first like to highlight some of the work and accomplishments of your elected officials, volunteers, and staff.

This is the one-year mark since this council was seated. Unfortunately, two city councilors resigned due to personal reasons, so those seats are being filled by individuals appointed by the city council. These seats will be filled at the next general election in November this year so I encourage any interested citizens to consider running for the four open seats. I am convinced the more choices the citizens have on the ballot, the better the outcome.

I consider one of the measures of an effective council is attendance. The city council met 32 times in regular, special, or work sessions. Since January 2023 the attendance record has been 85%, meaning there we 33 total absences during these meetings for the year. Note this does include the absences created when the two councilors resigned and before the appointees were seated. I know conflicts sometimes occur, but I believe we can do better in the coming year.

Another measure I value is the output of the council or what work was accomplished. Your city council adopted 18 resolutions and four ordinances in 2023, along with many more motions addressing critical issues.

The volunteerism over the past year has been outstanding. First, our committees are nearly filled with citizen representatives. Of the 55 total seats available across all committees, excluding the sub committees which have no defined number of seats, only 11 are vacant. In the past, there have been many more vacancies, with some committees not even having enough members to constitute a quorum. This is no longer the case. The Parks and Community Services Committee, Library Board and Oakridge Economic Development Advisory Committee are fully staffed with citizen volunteers. All these committees are doing important and valuable work bringing well thought out recommendations to the city council for policy implementation. And volunteers play key roles in supporting city initiatives such as staffing the Oakridge Public Library and the Oakridge Warming Center during the winter months.

I’d now like recognize the significant efforts of your city staff, beginning with our public safety departments:

**Oakridge Police Department –**

* 1. In the normal course of duties this year, OPD was responsible for two lifesaving events.
  2. In addition to their patrol duties, OPD performs mutual aid, providing emergency back-up to USFS Law Enforcement, Lane County Sheriff, ODFW, Oregon State Patrol, federal agencies, and Union Pacific Railroad security personnel in our area. As the name implies, this mutual aid flows both ways with these organizations backing up OPD when needed. An excellent example of the aid was demonstrated when OPD assisted County, State, and Federal agencies as needed during the Bedrock/Salmon fires.
  3. OPD took the initiative to improve communication with the Lane County District Attorney's Office which has resulted in more felony convictions.
  4. OPD also partnered with Lane County Sheriff's Office to receive de-escalation training.
  5. Our officers also received training in Leadership, Code Enforcement, Traffic Safety, Emergency Medical Response and Animal Control.
  6. OPD partners with Lane Regional Air Protection Agency to increase compliance with Targeted Airshed requirements surrounding air quality improvement. This year marks the first which the area has reached attainment regarding particulate matter levels in the atmosphere.
  7. An important element of our police department is the reserve program. We currently maintain two reserve Lieutenants on staff who together have contributed over 1000 hours of service this year. They also provided security at local events including the Bus Fair, Blackberry Jam, Go Beyond Racing and the Tree Planting festival parade.
  8. OPD has strong community engagement, this year supporting/hosting National Night Out, Fall Fun Night, Shop with a Cop, Coffee with a Cop, Basketball Sundays and acts as the Charter Organization for local Boy Scouts to keep this important program running in Oakridge.
  9. Officers also make individual contributions to the community like the generous personal donation of building materials by Officer Valeri Miller to a local family.
  10. Your Police Chief, Kevin Martin, serves as the District 8 representative for the Oregon Association of Chiefs of Police. Those duties included a visit to Washington DC to meet with the Oregon Congressional delegation.

**Oakridge Fire and EMS Department -**

1. Under the leadership of Chief Scott Hollett, the department has undergone significant facility improvements, including all new ﬂooring and updates to front oﬃce and training room, a Promethean monitor for training, a new emergency generator, network upgrade, new low cost VOIP phone system, exterior electronic door locking system, new beds, mattresses, desks, and wardrobes in dorm rooms.
2. New equipment includes a refurbished Zoll X series heart monitor, new extrication tools leveraging Hazeldell Rural Fire District funds, budgeted for an updated recue vehicle and an updated command vehicle, and a grant funded $400,000 Type 3 engine.
3. Training. The department hosted numerous training events, including a regional Prehospital Trauma Life Support, Advanced Cardiac Life Support and Pediatric Life Support classes, a regional First 5-Min Fire Training class, an EMR class with community volunteers as well as our police officers. The paid staff and volunteers have attended multiple advanced level classes outside the department.
4. Operations. Awarded two grants, one for ﬁre season up staﬃng and the other for fuels mitigation for rural addressing. OFD has improved volunteer numbers utilizing recruitment drives and improved part-time staﬀ numbers, resulting in less OT for full-time staﬀ. They also completed a yearlong data collection and report for a mandated Medicare study. This project was completed in-house which saved the city approximately $23,000. With the assistance of our new Physician Advisor, OFD now has some of the most progressive EMS patient care protocols in Lane County. OFD received, for the third time, the STEMI award from PeaceHealth for the fastest door to balloon time. The department passed the Oregon Health Authority inspection of our ambulance service.
5. Fire Prevention/Community Involvement. The department participated in numerous community engagement activities including the first-ever Open House for Hazeldell Rural Fire Protection District, fire prevention activities for home schoolers, prevention activities at the Oakridge Elementary School, recruitment booth at multiple community events, multiple community CPR classes, and installed approximately 100 smoke alarms for citizens. They also supported community events such as the Tree Planting Festival parade, 4th of July festival, Pancake Breakfast, Veterans Day Breakfast, Breakfast with Santa, Lighted Holiday Parade & Festival of Lights.

**Oakridge Public Works -**

1. Led by Robeart Chrisman, in 2023, your small, yet hard working public works crew successfully repaired 27 water leaks, 140 locates, some of which take a whole day with two workers, 275 service orders, and 12,842,240 gallons of water distributed.
2. Their efforts resulted in the department being recognized by a Outstanding Performance from the Oregon Health Authority. On top of that, they did not see one single hit on any of our water samples for the entire calendar year.
3. In the month of October, we had an unrepairable water leak, which led us to making a new tap and laying over nine-hundred feet of brand-new two-inch water line, to make sure our residents had adequate water pressure, as well as volume.
4. This happened to coincide with the Cherry St. project, turning the street from one of our worst streets to one of the best.
5. Infrastructure. During 2023, significant structure improvements were made. All our Pressure Relief Valves were serviced and Well 2 was rebuilt. This is our biggest producer, and this work was a significant accomplishment from a distribution standpoint, going from a production of four-hundred gallons a minute to seven-hundred gallons a minute. In addition, the department prepped two locations for brand new FEMA funded generators, one at the Fire Department, which now makes the Fire Department a full-service emergency response location, and the other at a wastewater lift station.
6. The bathrooms at Greenwaters park and Rest Area are susceptible to vandalism, but thanks to our part-time employees, they were able to give both bathrooms a facelift.
7. On the wastewater side, the team has been through some personnel changes, saying goodbye to Jackson Stone, retiring after 8 years of outstanding service at the plant. We welcomed Isaiah and Bob to the team and they quickly picked up the needed expertise to be successful. The process of ensuring wastewater treatment in meet state and federal regulations is daunting and the Oakridge team led by Clint Whitney have been complying with the complex regulations imposed by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, having received zero fines or penalties.
8. And one of the most important accomplishments achieved by Public Works was a perfect safety record for the year 2023. To top off our perfect safety record, the entire department became CPR certified and heat index certified.

**Administration & Finance -**

Led by City Administrator James Cleavenger and Finance Director Colleen Shirley, the department has been working diligently. Specifically:

* 1. The team has submitted and been awarded numerous grants, leveraging partnerships with local non-profits, volunteers, and others to assist.
  2. Accounts Payable & Accounts Receivable are continuously improving, making an antiquated financial accounting software work. Thankfully this will soon be made much easier as the city transitions to the new Caselle Government Accounting Software system which should bring us up to the current standard. Jackie and Leah continue to be the mainstay of the department, providing outstanding customer service daily.
  3. Municipal Court – Judge Segarra and Wendy continue to skillfully manage the municipal court, a very necessary part of the law enforcement system in this rural city. A complex and time-consuming effort, their efforts often go unappreciated by many behind the scenes, but know that without an Oakridge municipal court, law enforcement would be very negatively impacted.
  4. The Oakridge Public Library, headed up by Georgi Samuelson and an outstanding team of volunteers, create a warm and welcoming environment for the citizens of Oakridge. Through grants awards, the library has been able to purchase children's books, install an off-site book drop, change the lighting from fluorescent to LEDs, purchase new patron use computers and new staff computers. Also, through contact with Sen Wyden the library was able to obtain Library of Congress surplus books. Also, through contact with Literary Arts they were able to get copies of the 2024 Oregon Book Award finalists books.  But, most importantly, the team at the library has been able to keep to their published hours. Closures due to lack of staffing, another testament to the dedication of the volunteers.

Despite all these notable accomplishments challenges still exist so let’s dive in:

1. First and foremost are the emergency medical services the fire department provides to a large area of Lane County. These ambulance services were originally designed to operate cost neutral or nearly so, using revenues from private insurance, Medicare and Medicaid to cover personnel, capital and operating costs. This is not the case for the Oakridge Fire Department and many other EMS providers nationwide. The staffing requirements of operating an ambulance drives the largest budget item in the OFD budget, personnel costs which includes wages, overtime, contracted labor and volunteer stipends. These staffing expenses when included with medical and result in an estimated $450,000 deficit in operating the ambulance. This assumes a much-reduced staffing requirement at OFD if their responsibility was reduced to fire response only. A demonstration of this is reflected in the 27% increase in the Fire Department budget since the FY21-22 budget. I am strongly committed to a quick response ambulance service for the citizens of Oakridge however the current situation is fiscally unsustainable. The staff and city council must work with our county and fire/EMS partners to find a resolution. This issue will be further exacerbated when the public safety fee expires on June 30, 2024.
2. The second financial issue facing the city is the “going concern” called out by the city auditor in the FY21-22 audit. This going concern was over the governmental financial condition, imbalance of shared costs, using restricted and committed funds for unintended purposes, and non-compliance with Oregon Minimum Standards requirements. Most glaring was the fact the ending balances in the General Fund for years 2020, 2021 and 2022, if you subtract restricted and committed funds was zero. Unfortunately, due to a poor choice of a former auditor, we were behind on audits, and we have been anxiously awaiting the FY22-23 audit due in December 2023 to reconvene the budget committee once we have a current picture of the city’s fiscal condition. Significant changes might need to be made to the current budget through the supplemental budget process.
   1. I am concerned about the city’s aging Infrastructure and our recapitalization plans. While the city staff to date has done what they can to shore up this infrastructure, little has been set aside for catastrophic failures which could cripple the service to our citizens. We need to commission a master water and wastewater plan which defines our intended future for these systems and how we save to afford those upgrades. Once we have a clearer financial picture as referred to previously, the staff can get to the business of planning for the future. I am also disappointed the American Rescue Plan Act grant funding did not address more of the infrastructure needs of the city.
   2. Our personnel cost increases outpace all other appropriations. The combined increases of COLAs, step increases, seasonal workers, stipend raises, and additional hiring all result in skyrocketing personnel budgets. While I understand the need to retain the talented people we have onboard, and how that drives the need for better benefits, offsets must be found for these increases unless we find additional revenue can cover them.

These challenges can be overcome. Let’s buckle down, approach these challenges looking for a positive solution and work hard to bring the city where it needs to be.

In closing, I am encouraged by the forward momentum in our community. This can be seen by an increase in businesses entering the city, by the focus on the arts, and by the commitment of our citizens to improve the appearance and condition of the city where they can. And younger people are engaging in the community and in local government. They will be the future of Oakridge. I am looking forward to a positive and successful 2024 for all of Oakridge.

Thank you and once again, Happy New Year.