

Morrow County Board of Commissioners Work Session Meeting Minutes
June 1, 2022
Bartholomew Building Upper Conference Room
Heppner, Oregon

Present In-Person

Chair Jim Doherty
Commissioner Melissa Lindsay
Commissioner Don Russell
Tamra Mabbott, Planning Director

Zoom

JR Cook
Justin Green
Stephen Wreccics, Morrow County Planning

Start 11:00 a.m.

TOPIC: County Water Resource and Assessment

Commissioner Doherty introduced the work session stating that there is nothing more precious and with more importance than water. He pointed out that our County Comprehensive Plan calls out that we are tasked with water quality and water quantity. He referred to Grand County Colorado's work on water and national water management efforts across the nation. The Water Resource Management needs.

Question: Is there a necessity or opportunity for a water quantity and quality person, a water contract with a contractor similar to our Tourism contract – Karie Walchli? There are so many things listed in this area; drinking water, municipal or private water, recreational, preparedness, watershed recovery, stream projects, quality, water rights, economics, etc.

Umatilla County is considering a similar effort and it was discussed if this is a possible basin partnership.

It was recognized there is a hierarchy of needs in regards to County General Fund demands. Discussion; are there Federal Funds to access, grants funds, outside funds with less side boards or partnerships.

Tamra Mabbott: two things; there is quality and quantity. Many overlap with Planning; critical Groundwater areas, quality planning, Goal 6 work and other policy considerations. Planning attends the LUBGWMA committee. Tamra noted that she appreciates the discussion so we can coordinate. NOWA does a lot of work in this area and boots on the ground water work, referencing, on Zoom, JR Cook and Justin Green with NOWA interested in the conversation and to see if there is capacity or interest to engage. And also pointed Stephen, County GIS on Zoom with maps if wanted.

Commissioner Russell questioned is our goal to provide potable drinking water or to clean up the aquifer from 60 year of poor farming practices.

Commissioner Doherty stated this discussion is more about that (Nitrate work) would be a piece of what this would be. This is about a Water Czar position and we have been talking about this prior to the nitrate challenge.

Commissioner Russell shared that he thought issues with houses on domestic wells is solvable and not that expensive. He references his own home well experience. Relatively inexpensive to solve with a \$200 filter or whole house system around \$3,000 is affordable with a little bit of help to solve the drinking water issues. Cleaning up the aquifer a much bigger problem.

Commissioner Lindsay shared she hears of well drillers stating quantity issues and having to drop wells deeper in our region. The ground water restricted areas across our state, in regard to quantity, show us in red on the map denoting critical groundwater areas. I have been seeking a water person for 5 years here. I recently met with Rep. Cliff Bentz and he was extremely pointed that this is a very important topic that we must pay attention. Other Federal delegates are engaged on the quality issue too. She referenced the LPSCC (Local Public Safety Coordinating Council) coordinator position and the Broadband Action Team Fellowship position as perfect examples that with a person (staff) with the discussions and when we walk out of a room and have come up with policies or ideas that someone helps us drive the policy or ideas. NOWA does a great job but it is a membership and where does the rest of the non-membership get to the table. I would love to see a 1 year or 24 month contract with someone to drive these conversations with us or their going to be driven for us by the State or others. She referenced the great work of Rep. Mark Owens in Harney County.

Commissioner Russell questioned aren't water rights given by the State not the County. Discussion around water rights and water availability including permitting and municipality and what the State is actually doing. Discussion of Columbia River Water Rights and uses.

JR Cook; gave background of formation of NOWA (Northeast Oregon Water Association) starting under water quantity around regional planning. Sustainability for needs under a blue print bringing ag into the equation with the public entities as an advocacy arm. Expanded that the Mid Columbia Water Commission created as an arm to implementation. He sees NOWA working with Umatilla County and Morrow County to create the architecture toward a solution getting to a blue print of plans to then work toward building out the solutions. We have needs to protect public safety and loading but we are missing the "general contractor" piece of an agency to start locally with stakeholders and agencies. ODA, DLCD, DEQ, OWRD, OHA, ODFW. Someone needs to coordinate and provide messaging along with and to agencies to implement within their lane. Someone needs to facilitate with an IGA. We hope to help with that creation which needs trust and transparency but I don't think it's just one entity, I think it is an IGA with a budget to create an entity with a coordinator to do this work.

Justin Green; added a public entity helps to create trust in results that may come forward. Looking holistically at water while looking toward goals and thinks this is exciting work.

Tamra clarified that Oregon Water Resource regulates water but they don't develop or manage water. No state agency does in Oregon. An IGA on our shared aquifer with Umatilla County and a basin approach could. Place based planning efforts like Harney County takes a person with communication skills and specific expertise to work on this.

Discussion about Umatilla County partnerships in the basin, where the State fits in, where Tribal partners fit in and how to move forward.

The magnitude of the years of work on quality with no movement was mentioned by Commissioner Russell as well as the water wasters out there.

Commissioner Doherty suggested he would build a team to bring back this topic more formally in the future and work toward creating a detailed package.

No decision other than all Commissioners concur that this is a direction to head into with additional research

Adjourn 11:56 a.m.