

# Port, PUD, county deliver wish list to District 12 lawmakers

By Nevonne McDaniels

Save the Public Works Assistance Account, build a regional emergency operations center in Wenatchee and find a way to help ease the fallout from Alcoa's decision to mothball the Wenatchee Works plant next year.

Those were three of the items on the wish list District 12 lawmakers received from county, port and public utility district officials at the Nov. 3 Tri-Commission meeting.

The lawmakers, Sen. Linda Evan-Parlette and Reps. Cary Condotta and Brad Hawkins, took note of the requests in preparation for the 60-day legislative session set to start Jan. 11.

The Tri-Commission, which includes commissioners and staff members from Chelan County, the Chelan County PUD and Port of Chelan County and is attended by the county's mayors, meets periodically to discuss items of common interest. Meeting with lawmakers has been part of the process for several years.

"Several weeks ago, we met to talk about what we can bring to the three of you that is of common interest to each of the three boards," Chelan County PUD Director of External Affairs Tracy Yount, who chaired the meeting, told the lawmakers.

## Restoration of the Public Works Trust Fund

Topping that list, he said, is restoration of the Public Works Assistance Account, a revolving loan account funded by state utility and other taxes. Established in 1986, it has allowed cities, counties and public utility districts to secure low-interest loans to pay for public works projects, including water system improvements, paving and wastewater facilities planning.

In consecutive supplementary state budgets, the funds in the account were swept to help balance the

state budget, in part to deal with education funding following the McCleary decision.

This will be the fourth year without loans.

Yount said about \$500 million in the account was used to help balance the budget in the 2013-15 biennium, along with some of the debt payments.

"It had some immediate implications," he said. "The county applied for a \$3 million loan for paying, which was denied. Our concern is what does the future look like? The port, county and PUD are asking you to support funding and interest payment restoration to the public works assistance account that was swept in the previous biennium."

Entiat Mayor Keith Vradenburg said the fund is important to small cities.

"We can't bond or get loans we can afford," he said. "And the grant market is so competitive. Money is drying up for us, but we are still required to provide infrastructure. I know several cities trying to build sewer plants or upgrade water systems. It's tough for small cities when you don't have any way of getting funds."

The lawmakers said Chelan County officials' concerns are echoed across the state.

Condotta said a concentrated effort to support the move by port and public utility districts as well as cities and counties will help get the message across in Olympia.

Parlette said should the fund be restored, it might come with some changes that limit which municipalities can access the low-interest loans.

"The bigger cities have access to bonding funds. It's easier for them because they are larger. The smaller ones do not," she said. "It is important to smaller communities that have no other way to get bonds to pay for those projects."

JC Baldwin, who serves on the Public Trust Fund Board as a citizen representative (though she also is

Port of Chelan County commissioner), said the board is working on addressing that concern.

But it won't make a difference if the funds are not returned to the account.

"If it's swept again, it will kill the account. It will be done," Baldwin said.

Parlette said she doesn't see that happening and committed to put a bug in the ear of several senators on the capital budget committee.

Hawkins said the fund has had a difficult time competing with education funding, which might ease somewhat this coming year.

"If the economy continues to recover and we have additional revenue, there is no reason we can't do something like this," Hawkins said. "The Public Works Assistance Account shouldn't be in a situation where it is continually trying to compete with education funding. That's an unlevel playing field. I don't think we should be in that position anymore," he said.

## Chelan County Emergency Operations Center

The Tri-Commission also requested legislator support for funding to build a regional emergency operations center.

Rich Magnusson of the Chelan County Emergency Management Department said the county could use a stand-up ready emergency operations center "that can go full-functional when an emergency breaks out."

The emergency management office currently works out of a training room in the fire station at Fifth and Western in Wenatchee, which was built in 1956.

"We have to pull wires down from the ceiling and have four or five dedicated phone lines that can be set up during an emergency," he said. "Unfortunately lately we have had a lot of large emergencies in the county and the region that

require a standup ready EOC that we just can't do."

During the Chelan Complex fires, they moved the facility to the Chelan fire station and borrowed one of their training rooms.

"We made it work, but it didn't have computers and standup workstations," Magnusson said.

During the Sleepy Hollow Fire, they spent 14 to 16 hours in the Walmart parking lot, working out of Douglas County's command trailer.

"Having a facility that all agencies can go to and within minutes be up and running is critical," he said.

He is proposing a two-story building on the footprint of two existing buildings on Chelan County Public Works property on Easy Street in Wenatchee.

The first floor would be equipment and apparatus storage, with the office and communications center on the top floor.

"A standup ready facility, located centrally where we can respond quickly, would be a public safety benefit, improve communications for all agencies involved in responding to an emergency," he said, including fire, aid, sheriff, state patrol and department of transportation.

"Everyone involved has a representative at the EOC so communication improves greatly. A state-of-the-art EOC with workstations, computers and monitors to track in real time during an emergency is critical," he said.

The Chelan County Emergency Management Department contracts with Chelan, Entiat, Cashmere and Leavenworth to provide emergency management services for those cities, as well as the county. Next year, Wenatchee will be added to the list.

The EOC also would be available to help Okanogan, Douglas, Grant and Kittitas counties, which are the Region 7 emergency management partners.

"It would be a big boost for the region," he said.

The construction

## Contact 12th District legislators



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**Rep. Brad Hawkins**  
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proposal is divided into two phases, seeking \$150,000 in 2016 for planning, design and site study. That would be followed in 2017 with construction, estimated at \$1.9 million.

The department has four staff members, two of those positions are funded by a Homeland Security grant. Grants to pay for equipment or planning have been more difficult to get, though looking for grants is part of the construction plan as well.

Lawmakers said they liked the idea.

"It seems an obvious need for the area," Hawkins said. "We were successful in getting certain capital budget requests funded that were related to improvements following the Carlton Complex Fire. I think this idea has a lot of merit."

## Alcoa shut-down

The economic impacts of the Alcoa shut-down, and how to deal with them, was also on the Tri-Commission agenda.

Chelan County Commissioner Ron Walter suggested forming a work group to consider all the options.

"As community leaders,

we need to take the lead and communicate with Alcoa and have those conversations about where they really are going and, as a community, what's the next logical thing to bring that kind of employment to Chelan County."

Alcoa is not saying the plant will be permanently closed, but Walter said the writing is on the wall.

"If you think about the smelting industry and long-term future of that, it's probably not a realistic expectation to have Alcoa produce aluminum in Chelan County in the long-term," he said.

The Port of Chelan County accepted the task of pulling together the work group, including inviting Alcoa to the table and keeping the legislators informed.

Chelan County PUD General Manager Steve Wright suggested talking to other communities that have been through a similar loss, including Spokane, Columbia Falls, The Dalles and Longview.

"It would be worthwhile to understand the impact and the strategy the community might have on how to approach this thing," he said.

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