

Shedding Some Light on an Old Rivalry

by Ross Heintzkill

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There's a story behind the feud the River Road neighborhood has with the city of Eugene. And like any good story, it involves money concerns, simmering resentments going back decades, and court-ordered installations of septic tanks.

Looking at a map of Eugene, one might assume that River Road is just a neighborhood of Eugene, but you'd be mistaken. Much to the chagrin of many residents who live in that large swath of unincorporated land, the entire River Road district can easily be mistaken for a part of the city of Eugene. What complicates things is that many of the next-door neighbors of those would-be-chagrined residents are — in fact — citizens of Eugene.

At the heart of the decades-long issue is the fact that River Road lies within Eugene's city boundaries. And the city of Eugene has been eyeing properties inside the independent neighborhood for decades. Many in River Road resent those years of attempts. But the city has shifted to a new tactic: win the hearts and minds of River Road. Their first attempt? Street lights.

"The River Road Water District has street lights that they've over the years installed," said Andrew Kading, Eugene's Traffic Operations Engineer, speaking of one of River Road's two administrative districts. Kading said the Water District installed them, but recently "the local utility EWEB stopped servicing the district's street lights." And they can be expensive.

So, said Kading, "the city has decided to pick up that work." By offering regular and reliable services to the community of River Road, maybe the city can show good faith to work with the district and begin bringing them into the folds of the city.

But why should the city of Eugene care about servicing street lights for a neighboring unincorporated district? Well because it's not exactly "neighboring." River Road falls squarely inside Eugene's Urban Growth Boundary. A strange term to many people, "urban growth boundary" means Oregon cities can't expand beyond their urban boundary.

The upside: cities throughout the state have limited sprawl, and Eugene enjoys a rich agricultural sector. The downside: a city's growth and income can be severely restricted.

Because if a city gets stopped at its urban growth boundary, and can't add new property, its taxes are also limited. But what if an unincorporated district sits inside a city's urban growth boundary? Annexing those properties could provide a boost to the city's revenues.

“River Road could be annexed, but probably not in my lifetime -- and I’m 75 in two months,” said Dennis Durfee, on the Board of Directors for both of River Road’s two districts. “If they annex River Road, they’re going to get a bunch of voters who are really pissed at them. That’s a bunch of negative voters who are going to vote against everything they want to do.”

And there are some River Road voters who might be — as Mr. Durfee put it — “pissed” at the city. Over the four decades he’s worked as Superintendent of the River Road Park and Recreation District, Dale Weigandt has watched the city try to annex properties within the River Road district several times.

At one point, he said, the city resorted to “hostile annexations.” A city ordinance required that anyone seeking a building permit first annex their property to the city of Eugene, even if they didn’t want to.

River Road didn’t take it lying down, according to Weigandt. The district fought it through the courts so that only contiguous property could be annexed. But not after some damage had already been done: a patchwork quilt of properties now belonged to Eugene.

Weigandt and his staff at the River Road Community Center said that’s why they still struggle to explain to some residents — some who live across the street — that they’re technically “out of district” and have to pay a higher cost to use the pool while their next-door neighbors don’t.

Another time, the city forced the entire district onto a sewer system. “Turns out before this everyone in the district was on septic tanks and there was poop leaking into the river through the subsurface which -- you know -- isn’t great,” said Kading. “Which wound up with a large bill to residents of the water district and people were very angry about that.”

Kading has recently become more familiar with the history because now, the city of Eugene wants to offer olive branches to River Road.

And according to Weigandt, some of those seem to be working. He says two crosswalk intersections have already been installed and another will soon be installed. Plus, he said, “a neighborhood group for River Road argued for reducing a local speed limit from 40 to 35,” and the city accommodated.

But now with talks about the Eugene transit EMX traveling down River Road, he said residents’ hackles may be rising again: more evidence of “the city trying to encroach.”

“People don’t want to throw money at something if they don’t have say in its governance,” said Weigandt. “People pay property taxes to the city of Eugene, but the money can be used for its general fund. Districts are a purer form of government because what you pay to is what you get.”

And so the conflict continues. But city planners think in the long-term. And young people are starting to move into River Road, people unfamiliar with the decades-long conflict. The question is if those young people know anything about the conflict, or if they even want to remain independent, and who’s organizing them?

“People older than me -- those people are selling their homes and moving into nursing homes. Or dying,” Durfee said. He added, of the eventual annexation of River Road that “it’s inevitable. Just look at a map, it’s inevitable.”