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EWEB CEO: For the betterment of drinking water

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The Eugene Water & Electric Board is responsible for ensuring that our entire community has access to clean and reliable drinking water that is essential for public health and safety, fire protection and economic vitality.

To meet this expectation amidst the increasing threats from human and naturally caused disruptions, EWEB commissioners and staff employ a comprehensive “source to tap” approach. This includes significant investments in the McKenzie watershed, particularly in post-fire restoration, treatment, storage and distribution upgrades, emergency water stations and potentially a second treatment plant on the Willamette River.

Consistent with our mission, and as has been planned for decades, EWEB will be replacing and constructing new water storage facilities throughout the city. Instead of a few large tanks, like the 15-million-gallon tank at College Hill, EWEB over the next decade will construct six smaller water storage tanks at three locations, including East 40th, College Hill and Hawkins Hill. This distributed approach improves water quality, operational and maintenance flexibility and increases our resiliency to potentially disruptive events.

Due to the foresight of previous generations, the three water storage locations were specifically selected decades ago because they are identical in elevation, creating a balanced and efficient gravity-fed system. Higher up is not better in this case. These locations serve the entire community — 200,000 people, thousands of businesses and dozens of medical facilities, emergency services, schools and parks. Because of their age and condition, the College Hill and Hawkins Hill reservoirs will be replaced following the construction of the two tanks at East 40th, a 10-acre site that was purchased by EWEB in the 1950s because of its location within our service territory, proximity to other infrastructure and exact 607-foot elevation.

As is common with major infrastructure projects, EWEB has invested years in the research and planning process for the water storage at East 40th, including an ecological survey, geological report and a Triple Bottom Line assessment to evaluate construction options from the perspectives of habitat impacts, costs and disruption to the site and to neighbors.

The ecological survey confirmed that there is a healthy oak woodland on the site and that EWEB can construct the tanks while still retaining 75% of the habitat. Oak woodlands were once common in the Willamette Valley but are now relatively rare and have been identified by state and local resource protection agencies as priority habitats for protection and restoration. Based on this research, EWEB made the decision to situate the water tanks in a way that would minimize impact to the oak habitat. Sadly, it is necessary to remove

some trees, including some older firs. Large trees like these are being donated to restoration and community-based projects.

The TBL assessment revealed that altering the preliminary proposal of constructing storage in a phased approach over 10 years and instead constructing both tanks at East 40th concurrently would save more than $1.4 million and 2,100 truck trips through the city – reducing noise, street damage and carbon emissions. Because of the site geology, earthwork, including tree removal, will need to take place within both tank footprints independent of whether one or both tanks are initially constructed. Additionally, by building both tanks concurrently, the overall timeline is reduced by six months.

Providing accurate, timely and straightforward project information is critically important to us and we have actively engaged the community and area neighbors in our project plans in a variety of ways. Although not a formal land-use requirement, EWEB has voluntarily presented information and discussed this project in multiple public board meetings over the past two years, listened to public testimony, discussed the project in bill inserts and quarterly reports, developed a dedicated webpage for the project, delivered emails and mailings and held virtual and in-person meetings with the neighbors most impacted by this project.

EWEB commissioners, management and staff recognize that any construction project of this magnitude will have impacts and cause disruptions, and we will work hard to mitigate these issues. When completed, this site will still include natural habitat, trails and open space for the community, as well as resilient drinking water storage for the benefit of all of Eugene for decades to come, which is EWEB's top priority.

Frank Lawson is the CEO and general manager of the Eugene Water & Electric Board.