

Editorials Letters: Commentary

Balancing cost, efficiency

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Eugene Water & Electric Board officials must have felt whipsawed on Wednesday when members of the Eugene City Council said the utility should reduce the cost of its new operations center while also incorporating additional energy efficiency features. It's a familiar feeling for EWEB: It has been struggling to keep its costs low and its energy standards high since planning for the center began.

These two goals are not always in conflict; good design can save both money and energy. But tradeoffs are unavoidable, and the council should acknowledge that EWEB has achieved a reasonable balance.

The trucks, supplies and crews that build, maintain and repair EWEB's electric and water lines currently are housed in buildings that would not meet any modern standard of environmental sustainability. Moving the utility's operations from the Willamette riverfront to a new location at Roosevelt Boulevard and Belt Line Road will be a significant environmental upgrade. The center will achieve a silver rating under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards, and EWEB hopes it eventually can achieve a gold LEED certification.

A year ago, EWEB's plans began looking not gold-rated, but gold-plated. The cost of the operations center had reached an estimated \$98 million. The utility board wisely directed the staff to find ways to bring the cost down, resulting in an \$85.4 million project. Cost-cutting steps have included reductions in the size of the operations buildings and the elimination of some energy-saving and sustainability features.

For instance, the center will make use of passive solar energy, but it won't include an active solar energy system such as photovoltaic panels to generate electricity. City Councilor Alan Zelenka, who has a strong background in alternative energy systems, questioned the utility's decision: "If EWEB isn't doing solar PV, who will?"

Actually, lots of people will. The nation's solar PV capacity is doubling every two years, reaching 620,000 kilowatts in 2006. Installations are popping up in Lane County as the price of solar PV panels and other equipment falls and efficiency improves. This expansion is largely fueled by state and federal tax credits that reduce the payback time for solar PV by about half.

As a municipal agency, EWEB is unable to take advantage of these credits. Eventually, economies of scale, technological improvements and rising power prices will make solar PV installations cost-effective without tax credits. But that hasn't happened yet.

Customers expect EWEB to be a leader in conservation and efficiency. They also expect rational economic decisions. The utility has balanced those goals in the design of its operations center.
