



## How does the City of Walla Walla prioritize, select and fund road construction projects?



By Neal Chavre  
Walla Walla City Engineer  
nchavre@wallawallawa.gov

**T**he City is frequently asked how street projects are chosen, and why someone's street may not have been fixed yet, even though many residential streets are in much worse condition than the major roadways slated for improvements. Simply put, there isn't enough money to do everything, and the City needs to carefully plan improvements that offer the maximum citywide benefit.

In 2012, the citizens of Walla Walla overwhelmingly approved a 0.2 percent addition to local sales tax in order to fund the Transportation Benefit District (TBD). This program generates roughly \$1 million per year for transportation projects, and remains in effect until 2022. Under current state law, voters will have a chance to extend the 0.2

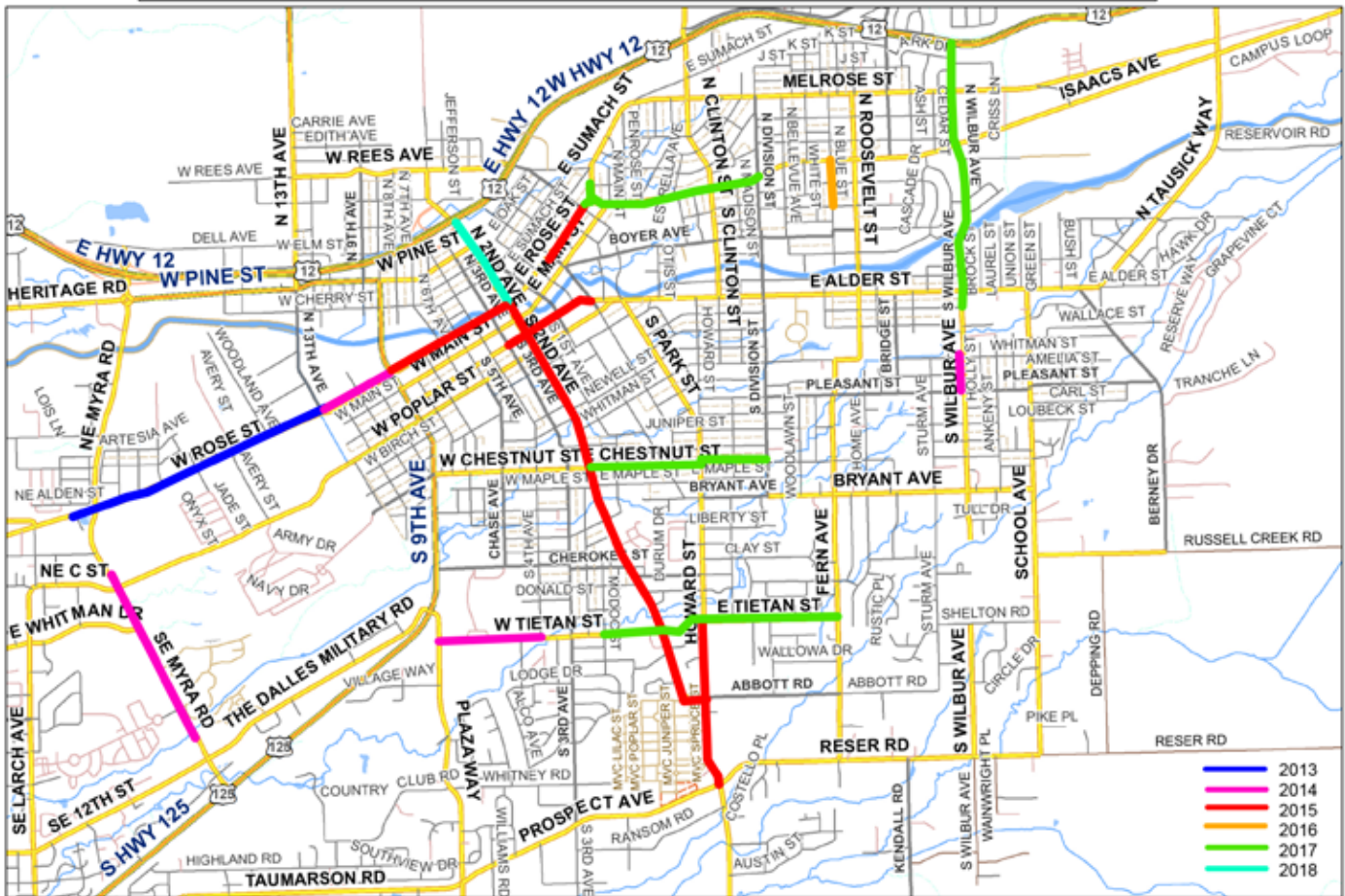
percent TBD sales tax for one additional 10-year term.

A potential TBD project must be included on the TBD priority list; it must have available (or strong potential for) funding; and it must be coordinated with other needs, such as utility replacements, streetlights, traffic signals, etc. There is much more to think about than just the pavement surface, and how this all comes together can get a little complicated.

### Priority

When the TBD was first established, the City used the results of a 2011 resident survey that identified streets people felt were the highest priority to improve. Staff worked cooperatively with the Transportation Advisory Committee, a citizen committee charged with overseeing the TBD, to develop a weighted priority system that included not only the resident survey results, but also traffic

## COMPLETED TBD PROJECTS 2013-2018



A map showing the TBD projects the city has completed since 2013.

volumes, road classification and pavement condition. The top 10 roadways on the TBD priority list emerging from this process (with current progress shown) were:

1. Rose Street — Completed third (final) phase in 2015
2. Isaacs Avenue — Second (final) phase starting construction this year
3. Alder Street — Major segments completed in 2015 and 2016
4. Second Avenue — Maintenance seal in 2015; north end completed in 2018
5. Tietan Street — Maintenance seal in 2014 and 2017; major segment currently under construction
6. Poplar Street — Corridor study completed; seeking grant funding for construction
7. Howard Street — Planned for 2022
8. Plaza Way — Planned for 2022 (grant dependent)
9. Bryant Avenue — Not yet planned (grant dependent)

10. Wilbur Avenue — Worst section completed in 2014; maintenance seal completed in 2017

### Available funding

City street projects are primarily funded by the City's Infrastructure Repair and Replacement (IRRP) program, the TBD, outside grants and other limited local funding sources such as the City's General Fund.

The largest piece of the project-planning puzzle is usually funding availability. Unfortunately, even \$1 million a year from the TBD isn't nearly enough to address all the City's transportation needs. The IRRP program is very important, but it is funded through utility rates, and is only applicable on roads with what we call the failing trifecta: failing water, sewer and pavement in the same stretch of road.

Staff must still find creative ways to use local money as leverage for outside grant funding sources in order to fully fund major projects.



Portions of Rose Street (left) and Wilbur Avenue before and after improvements the City performed in 2014.

There is often no feasible way to complete larger projects in a timely manner using only local funds.

Since the 2012 establishment of the TBD, the City's success with this strategy has been remarkable. With nearly \$28.7 million worth of project costs, the TBD has only contributed just over \$6 million. This is nearly a 5-to-1 return on investment! This equates to a tremendous amount of street work that wouldn't otherwise be possible using only local money. The City will continue pursuing these outside funding opportunities for future projects, such as the upcoming Poplar Street improvements.

However, grants are very competitive; offer only limited funding opportunities; and are only available for the major streets (arterials and collectors) — not local residential roadways.

### **Coordination with utility and other needs**

The City considers the condition of underlying water, sewer and stormwater utilities when planning a road project. Nobody wants to construct a new road on top of old, failing utilities. Unfor-

tunately, the utility needs don't always line up perfectly with the street priorities, forcing some difficult decisions to be made at times.

City staff relies on each utility's master plan to determine the long-term needs for the system. In some cases, staff performs condition assessments of the utilities prior to developing a street project. It's not uncommon to adjust road project schedules based on the utility conditions.

Another cost consideration is compliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Federal law requires that any road treatment considered an alteration — such as repaving — install and/or update curb ramps at each intersection to current standards. This typically adds \$20,000-30,000 per intersection.

There are far more street repair needs than the City has funding to address. We have worked hard to develop an unbiased prioritization system to address street repairs. It may not always be apparent, but significant thought goes into planning City street projects.