

Pendleton schools dump longtime bus company

Ohio company wins bid despite having higher offer

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The Pendleton School District's 40-year relationship with Mid Columbia Bus Co. is coming to an end.

The Pendleton School Board on Monday, Feb. 14, approved a bid from First Student, a Cincinnati, Ohio, school bus company, to take over the district student transportation services for the next five years. Midco, the only other bidder for the contract, was the runner-up.

Michelle Jones, the district's director of business services, said this was the first time Pendleton had put its school bus contract up for bid. Districts aren't required to solicit bidders for transportation contracts, but Jones said school officials felt it was something they owed their various constituencies.

"I think we have a duty to our stakeholders, to our parents and our students to make sure that we are providing the best service to our families," she said. "And we wanted to go out to bid to make sure that what we were offering was the best that we could do, and I think we found that we couldn't justify that by just continuing to renew contracts and we needed to see what else was available for our families."

The district on Nov. 17 issued a request for proposal for its school bus services. Potential bidders would be evaluated on their qualifications, financial sta-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

A school bus is bathed in the early morning sunlight May 12, 2021, at the Mid Columbia Bus Co. bus barn outside Pendleton. Now the sun is setting on the relation between bus company and Pendleton School District, which on Monday, Feb. 14, 2022, approved a bid for an Ohio company to provide school bus service.

bility and their service and performance, among other factors. Following the Jan. 5 bid deadline, Jones said a panel composed of herself, Superintendent Chris Fritsch and Matt Yoshioka, director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, evaluated the proposals.

In the cover letter attached to its bid, First Student got off to an inauspicious start.

Timothy Wulf, First Student's director of business development, wrote in bold font that his company was unlikely to be the lowest bidder because of the costs associated with the bus driver shortage.

But Wulf then pivoted to what First Student could offer the district, including a new bus facility.

"As the district is fully aware of, a bus facility is more than challenging to find in Pendleton," he wrote. "However, we did! We found an excellent facility and would like to offer it to the district to control the lease. This alone, is worth making a change."

Wulf went on to summarize First Student's bid: 28 new buses plus eight older models, a driver salary range of \$18.71 to \$23.32 per hour with a \$500 signing bonus, an "opti-

mization study" meant to reduce ride times and possibly reduce routes, and new technology, including a school bus tracker app for parents.

First Student stated it could provide its services for \$795,831 per year plus rate-based fees that vary depending on bus usage.

The Pendleton School District started contracting with MidCo in 1982, but the company's roots in Eastern Oregon extend further than that. MidCo began its life as Flatt's Trucking Service, a mail and freight transportation business, before expanding into the school bus busi-

ness when it bid on a contract for the Condon School District in 1956. MidCo eventually expanded its operations to include districts all over rural Oregon, including districts in Union County, and Idaho. In 2015, the Flatt family sold MidCo to Landmark Student Transportation, a Canadian school bus company.

But recent years haven't always gone smoothly for MidCo. Pendleton parents frequently complained of late buses, long routes and unchecked bullying on the buses. Some of those complaints filtered up to the school board level, where MidCo representa-

tives attributed the shortcomings to a nationwide bus driver shortage. Last summer, MidCo attempted to revamp its recruitment strategy by upping bus driver wages.

Chuck Moore, MidCo's region vice president, leaned on Pendleton and MidCo's shared history in the company's bid cover letter.

"We are confident that as an Oregon based company with local knowledge, we have the ability to be more efficient, responsive and will swiftly be able to identify and make any changes or adjustments needed," he wrote. "Our enthusiastic staff is thrilled to continue to work closely with administration personnel and is committed to continue to build relationships with each Principal, Secretary and Teacher."

MidCo's bid was \$645,721 per year plus rate-based fees.

Several MidCo employees and community members used the public comment section of a meeting to defend the company, highlighting how much they enjoyed working with the district and questioning why the district didn't consult with drivers or parents before making the decision. MidCo administrators struck a bit-sweet note, thanking the district for working with them and expressing hope that they will work together again in the future.

Ultimately, the public comments didn't deter the school board from unanimously approving the First Student bid. First Student will take over bus services on July 1, ahead of the 2022-23 school year.

Haines city councilor running for governor

Peter Hall has lived in Baker County community since 2004

By JAYSON JACOBY
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

BAKER CITY — Peter Hall is a Democrat running for Oregon governor who wants to distinguish himself not only from Republicans in the race, but also from candidates in his own party.

Hall, 69, has lived in Haines since 2004 and is a member of the Haines City Council.

A retired chef, Hall is also chairman of the Baker County Democratic Party and a recent member of the board for the League of Oregon Cities.

His bid for the Democratic nomination in the May 22 primary is not Hall's first foray into politics. He ran unsuccessfully to represent Baker County in the Oregon Legislature in 2006 and in 2014.

Hall said that he was motivated to enter the governor's race in part because he wants voters to understand that not all Democratic candidates are urban residents from the Willamette Valley who might tend to be more liberal than he is.

Hall said he disdains what he terms "magic wand thinking" among some Democratic politicians. He describes this approach as the belief, and one he considers misguided, that government regulations can fix any societal problem.

"I want to break through the idea that they can fix everything with a regulation or by spending money," Hall said.

He said he favors what he considers more pragmatic and flexible approaches to issues than what he calls "one size fits all."

As an example, Hall said he was a proponent of Oregon's multi-tiered minimum wage law, which reflects the range in living costs from, say, Eastern Oregon to the Portland area.

Hall, who was born in Seattle and earned a bachelor's degree in German and political science from the University of Washington, believes the state should use the same approach to determining poverty levels, using as criteria cost of living as well as income.

Climate change

Hall said he wants to see Oregon look at new options for dealing

with water shortages for farms and ranches due to drought.

He points out that although much of Oregon's surface water, especially in arid Eastern Oregon, is claimed by property owners with water rights, in many years there isn't nearly enough water to satisfy all those owners, which harms agriculture.

Hall advocates for the government potentially buying, from willing sellers, properties with water rights and converting the land to other uses. That, combined with an emphasis on more efficient use of water, would make more water available to the existing farmers and ranchers, he said.

"We can't make water magically appear," he said. "We need to focus on the reality of our water crisis."

Hall emphasizes that such a program would depend on farmers and ranchers working together to get the most out of the limited water supply.

He believes drought is only one of the effects of climate change.

Another that has affected all of Oregon is wildfire. Hall said in some places, and in particular east of the Cascades, some forests are overcrowded and need to have some of the fuel removed.

Hall said commercial logging "could be a component" of that effort.

"There are areas where it's perfectly appropriate," he said, although he cautions that logging needs to be done carefully to avoid leading to even worse environmental problems.

Supporting 'responsible Republicans'

Although Hall is a member of the party that has dominated Oregon politics for the past four decades — seven of the state's members of Congress are Democrats — he said he would have no objection to Republicans filling more of those seats.

But not what he considers extremist Republicans who support Donald Trump.

"I want responsible Republicans, centrist, pragmatist, old-school Republicans," Hall said, citing as examples two of Oregon's former U.S. senators, Mark Hatfield (who also served as governor) and Bob Packwood.

Hall said another factor that motivated him to file as a candidate was Baker City Mayor Kerry McQuisten's announcement in late June 2021 that she was seeking the Republican nomination in the gov-

ernor's race.

Hall said he wants to show voters that Republicans, and specifically McQuisten, don't represent the beliefs of all of rural Oregonians. He contends that he would be more effective at bridging what he called the "east-west divide" in Oregon than McQuisten would be.

Masks and mandates

Hall said he has been upset by people who decry Gov. Kate Brown's executive orders regarding face masks as "tyranny and dictatorial."

"I find that absolutely insulting to the people around the world who actually suffer under real oppression, tyranny and dictatorships," Hall said. "There's a difference."

Hall said the governor's mask mandate was "probably overreach," and he's more concerned about the lack of enforcement and compliance than about the basic idea of encouraging residents to wear face masks, in indoor situations where social distancing isn't possible, to curb the spread of COVID-19.

He also believes the governor and other state officials have done a poor job of explaining the mask mandate.

Hall said that were the decision his to make, he would have made it explicit that the state would support any business or venue that chose to strictly enforce a mask requirement, but that businesses could also choose whether, or how, to enforce it.

He admits that's essentially the situation that has prevailed for many months in parts of Oregon, including Baker County.

Too much big — government and business

Hall said he finds onerous the common complaint among Republicans that government regulation is stifling businesses, including agriculture.

"The real regulations you've got to worry about, especially from a farmer's standpoint, is big corporations, which basically act like a government," Hall said.

He said corporations have too much control over the marketplace, including prices paid to the people who produce our food.

"The problem isn't big government or big business — it's just big," Hall said. "Big business is controlling big government. But (Republicans) don't talk about that part."

Hall's website — www.peterhallgovforall.com — has more of his policy positions.

Man sues Pendleton Rite Aid over delay filling prescription

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — A lawsuit filed Feb. 9 in Umatilla County Circuit Court alleges a late prescription from a Pendleton pharmacy caused a man's hospitalization.

Richard Morris, of Pendleton, is suing Rite Aid for \$5 million for noneconomic damages plus an unspecified sum for economic damages "according to proof at trial" in addition to attorney fees, according to the complaint.

La Grande attorney Wade Bettis filed the pleading, which claims Morris was prescribed Brilinta, a blood thinner, by a doctor at Providence St. Mary Medical Center in Walla Walla on April 22, 2021, two days after he had stents installed following a heart attack.

The prescription was sent to the Rite Aid in Pendleton, the lawsuit states, and Morris arrived that afternoon to pick up the drug. According to Morris, pharmacy staff told him they would need another hour to fill the prescription. He returned nearly two hours later, but staff told him the medication was unavail-

able and he would need to return the next day.

The complaint states that Morris returned to the pharmacy again on the morning of April 23, but staff told him the prescription still was not ready because, although the pharmacy had received a shipment of the medication, it was in its box. Morris ultimately received his Brilinta prescription later that day, at 4:16 p.m. By that time, he had missed three doses.

The lawsuit states Morris spent the following two days experiencing "a lack of energy" and small pains in his chest. On April 26, he awoke to "severe pain in his chest and arm" before he was taken to St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton, and then back to Providence St. Mary. Morris went under the knife again to address blood clots that formed around his stents, a development his doctor attributed to the missed blood thinner doses.

"Had plaintiff received his medication in a timely manner," the lawsuit states, "plaintiff would not have suffered a second heart attack less than a week after his first heart attack."

Mobile Service Outstanding Computer Repair

Fast & Reliable
Call or Text 24/7
Dale Bogardus 541-297-5831

Stay up-to-date with Microsoft's most advanced operating system to date,
Windows 11
Desktops and laptops in stock
Or upgrade yours today for the best security!

House calls (let me come to you!)
Drop Offs & Remote Services are Available
All credit cards accepted

