

Morrow County declares local emergency over nitrate levels

Declaration empowers commissioners to ‘act as an emergency management agency’

By **ERICK PETERSON**
East Oregonian

BOARDMAN — Morrow County commissioners have declared a local state of emergency related to water quality.

“Our legacy will be what we are doing now,” Commissioner Jim Doherty said Thursday, June 9, in a special meeting with one agenda item — the emergency declaration.



Doherty

Doherty recently had involved himself in the testing of Morrow County wells. According to the commissioner and Paul Gray, emergency manager for Morrow, 68 of 70 tested wells showed dangerously high nitrate levels.



Lindsay

Gray, who was present at the meeting, expressed special concern for infants and pregnant women. They are particularly vulnerable, he said.

He said he was seeing people who knew of water impurity but did not know what to do about it. Some people, he said, were boiling their water before drinking it, as they thought this would help. Gray said boiling only makes the water worse.

The emergency declaration would empower commissioners to “act as an emergency management agency,” work to end the emergency and coordinate with state and federal agencies.

In presenting the declaration, Doherty spoke of the nitrate issue as one of inheritance. It’s a problem that previous generations gave to us, and it’s one to which we are contributing, he stated.

He said this is especially unfair to Spanish-speaking residents, people who are harmed most by this problem.

The problematic wells

are largely rural, the commissioner said. He identified the worst areas as being places with high Hispanic populations.

Boardman city water, Doherty said, remains safe to drink, as it has been tested and has not risen to dangerous levels.

In the meeting, there was no mention of individual polluters.

Commissioner Melissa Lindsay, who attended the meeting via Zoom, stated she was concerned about this issue. She called safe drinking water a top priority. Still, she said, she was unsure why the declaration was being made at a special meeting June 9 rather than at the next regular meeting of the board on June 15.

Doherty replied, saying this is a big issue and addressing it “should have happened a long time ago.”

By signing this declaration, he said, bottled water would be sent to people the following day, and water trailers would be placed in the area next week.

Still, Lindsay expressed concern about local control, as she said she does not want to release power to the governor.

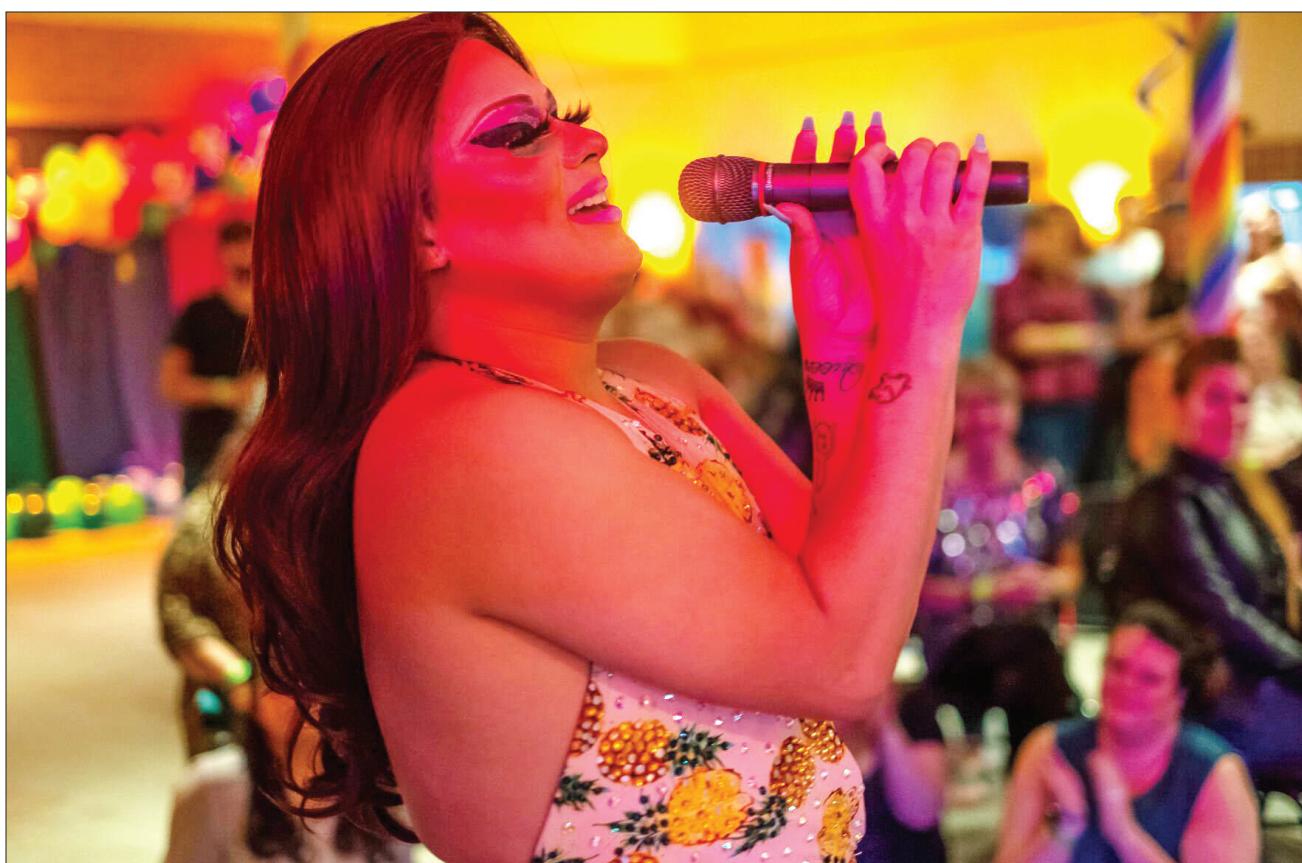
Gray reassured her otherwise.

“This is our disaster,” he said.

Morrow is not losing its ability to govern itself, he said, free of the sorts of government mandates that occurred during the pandemic. The emergency manager added the county could wait for the next meeting or some other time, or it could act now, potentially saving lives.

Doherty said there are around 1,300 wells in Morrow County that could be tested. By declaring an emergency, the county brings in the state of Oregon with resources to test these wells.

Members of the public viewed the meeting via Zoom. Some posed questions and made statements through chat. They largely expressed concern over the haste of this vote.



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

Karisma Woodward makes the crowd laugh Friday, June 10, 2022, during the Let ‘Er Drag show at Electric Sundown, Pendleton.

Drag queens take to the stage in a first for Round-Up City

Nine drag queens take stage in Pendleton on June 10

By **YASSER MARTE**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — She smeared a dash of blue face paint on her hand and with her brush she dipped into the blue like a painter with a palette.

Andrea Wabaunsee, stage name Tatiana Rexia, leaned in front of the mirror and applied the makeup on the canvas of her cheeks, getting ready for Let ‘Er Drag — a first-of-its kind drag show Friday, June 10, at Electric Sundown in Pendleton. The place was standing room only, with maybe 300 people in attendance.

“Mostly on stage I’m a female demon or genderless demon just because most of my drag is centered from my dark mind, especially as a child growing up being transgender and not being able to say that,” Wabaunsee said. “It’s kind of a lot so I keep it bottled up and paint it on my body.”

Her drag family considers her mother, a title and duty she takes with serious and admirable care. “It’s a lot of responsibility, especially when someone is in a situation where they don’t feel wanted publicly with the person they care for,” Wabaunsee said. “So I just need to be there like my drag mother was there for me.”

Nine drag queens from Pasco, which has had an active drag scene for many years, came to Pendleton to perform in the show, which also included some locals. Among the group was Brandon Granberry, Karisma and Sugar Woodward and performers only



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

Sugar Woodward prepares makeup Friday, June 10, 2022, right before the Let ‘Er Drag show at Electric Sundown, Pendleton.

going by their stage names, including Katana.

Granberry and Katana helped each other dress for the show, listened to music together and made fun of each other.

“I’m from the backwoods of North Carolina,” Granberry said. “Oh yeah, where real KKK members lived, that kind of backwoods. But I got out of there.”

Katana reflected on her upbringing, moving from one place to another with her mother, while she was in the fog of an abusive relationship. But as Katana glided onto the stage, her persona lit up with vibrant colors. The audience screamed with joy.

“It’s sort of like popping a balloon,” Wabaunsee said of the exhilaration and liberation of bursting through the seams of their personal to their stage identity. “It’s loud, crazy and a relief after.”



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

Drag queens Katana, below, and Brandon Granberry prepare Friday, June 10, 2022, for Let ‘Er Drag, a first-ever drag queen show in Pendleton.

Recount planned in razor close Baker County commission race

Christina Witham, Kody Justus both advance to runoff in Nov. 8 general election

By **JAYSON JACOBY**
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — The race for a position on the Baker County Board of Commissioners remains so close that County Clerk Stefanie Kirby is preparing to do a hand recount of more than 5,000 ballots.

But regardless of the outcome, the two candidates — Christina Witham and Kody Justus — will both advance to a runoff in the Nov. 8 general election.

They are vying for position 2, one of two part-time spots on the three-member Board of Commissioners.

According to Oregon

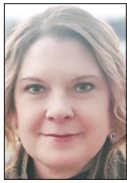
election law, if no candidate in a contested race gets more than 50% of the votes cast, then the top two advance to the general election. That standard also applies in races, like this one, with just two candidates.

In preliminary results from the County Clerk’s office on May 17, the day of the primary election, Justus had a three-vote lead, 2,485 votes to Witham’s 2,482.

The reason Justus doesn’t have at least 50% of the votes, even with his slim lead, is that there were also about 50 write-in votes, which constitutes about 1% of the total votes cast. That means Justus and Witham are dividing 99% of the



Justus



Witham

votes, and with such a close race, neither has quite reached that 50% plus one threshold needed to avoid a runoff in November.

The preliminary totals in the commissioner race didn’t include ballots that

were postmarked on May 17 but hadn’t arrived at the Clerk’s office that day.

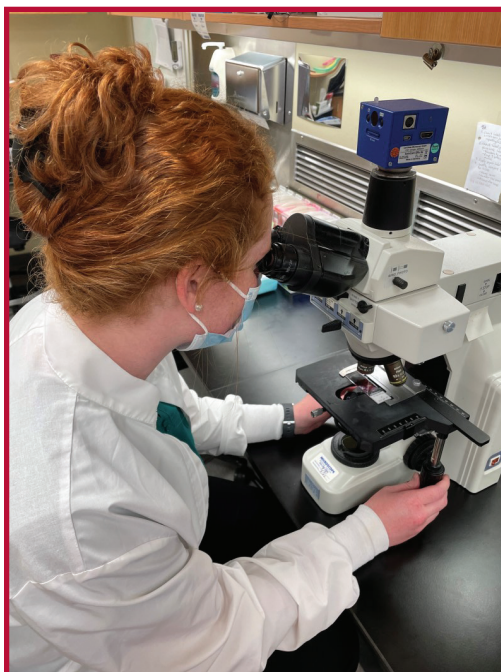
Kirby said her office received 61 postmarked votes within seven calendar days after the election, which made them eligible.

This was the first Oregon election in which those postmarked ballots are counted if they’re received within seven days.

Kirby said there were also 15 other ballots counted. In some cases the

voter had left the ballot in a drop box in a different county, which is allowed, and others either lacked a signature or the signature didn’t match the one the clerk’s office had on record for that voters.

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