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Weather

Mild temps with mix of cloudy, rainy days, and pleasant weekend



2020 Year In Pictures — Coming Next Week!

Comunidades amplifies BIPOC voices —B2

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Sports: Virtual track meet continues — A13

Columbia Gorge News

HOOD RIVER | THE DALLES | WHITE SALMON

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‘We can get through this together’

Bells will ring at noon on Friday to remember coronavirus victims

■ By Kirby Neumann-Rea
Columbia Gorge News

ON JAN. 15 AT NOON, BELLS will be ringing throughout Hood River County to honor community members who have died due to COVID-19.

At press time, the number of tolls stands at 21, but by mid-day Friday it will likely be more.

“We want to acknowledge the great losses we as a community have suffered during this pandemic and take a moment of silence to hear the bells ring for each community member,” said Belinda Ballah, who has organized the project. “Bells have been used throughout history to draw attention to this sort of thing,” Ballah noted.

Churches, agencies and parks throughout the county will be sounded, from The History Museum of Hood River County and St. Mary’s Catholic Church on the Heights to Wy’east Community Church in Odell, Cascade Locks Bible Church, Oak Grove Park,



Belinda Ballah has organized the ringing of bells throughout the county, including The History Museum of Hood River County, on Jan. 15 to remember those who have died from COVID-19. Kirby Neumann-Rea photo

See **BELLS**, page 12

Rep. Bentz speaks about chaotic, controversial first week in office

Freshman congressman defends his joining failed electoral challenge

■ By Kirby Neumann-Rea
Columbia Gorge News

Oregon Second District Rep. Cliff Bentz told *Columbia Gorge News* he feels discussion of the 25th Amendment and

Impeachment “are not productive toward the goal of a peaceful transition and will only divide our country more.”

Bentz (R-Ontario) responded via email Sunday to questions about current developments in the nation’s capital, where House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Democrat leaders were, at press

‘It was my goal to protect the integrity of and belief in our elections.’

— U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz

See **BENTZ**, page 11

Regional economic developers team up for pandemic response

■ By Walker Sacon
Columbia Gorge News

JESSICA METTA HAD worked on economic response to disasters before the COVID-19 pandemic reached the U.S. in 2020.

Late in 2019, the then-deputy director of Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (MCEDD) helped complete an assessment of the region’s response to natural disasters like landslides and wildfires. Metta, who was named MCEDD executive director in March 2020, said the pandemic put theory from the assessment into practice.

The idea for an “economic resiliency team” to provide support from a unified, interagency voice

to businesses in a time of disaster was drafted after 2017’s Eagle Creek Fire.

Throughout the pandemic, Metta has co-convoked Mid-Columbia Economic Resiliency Team (MCERT) with Nate Stice, who is Gov. Kate Brown’s Regional Solutions coordinator for the region.

The team itself has 49 members, and Metta said digital meetings have been attended by as many as 300 people. The team includes representatives from government agencies, chambers of commerce and ports, federal legislators’ offices and tourism organizations.

Michael Held, regional development officer for Business Oregon, said the idea for MCERT ended up being implemented

across Oregon through the Regional Solutions program. He said the teams respond to disasters in three phases: Response, stabilization and recovery.

Held said the pandemic has blurred lines between the three phases which would normally be clear when responding to events like floods, landslides or fires.

“Many levers are being pulled at the same time which impact all three phases,” Held said.

Metta said MCERT has helped businesses sift through correspondence from federal and state governments. The team has provided training on pandemic-specific scenarios like how to respond to a COVID-19 outbreak at work.

Drop in the bucket



In the most recent rounds of grant distribution, MCEDD (on behalf of HR and Wasco Counties) and Business Oregon awarded \$22.565 million to businesses in Wasco/HR/Sherman Co. They received more than 2500 applications totaling \$103.7 million in aid sought.

“We can’t loan or grant our way out of this. This is really just a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound.”

— Greg Price, CGCC Small Business Development Center

Held said recent conversations with businesses have had a different tone from early in the pandemic. He said some sectors

have stabilized and are now operating more like they would in a traditional

See **DISASTERS**, page 10

Wyden names capital violence 'terrorism' during town hall

■ By Walker Sacon
Columbia Gorge News

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) answered questions from residents of Gilliam, Grant, Sherman and Wheeler counties in a “virtual town hall” livestream on Monday, Jan. 11.

The meeting, Wyden’s first in 2021, was streamed on the Town Hall Project Facebook page. Live viewership peaked at 81 and 75-80 people watched the majority of the one-hour stream.

The senator opened the meeting with a statement on the violent protest last week at the U.S. Capitol before taking questions.

“My view is that this was an assault on our democracy,” Wyden said.

Wyden said events at the capitol on Wednesday, Jan. 6 represented “the textbook definition of domestic terrorism,” as participants attempted to use “force, violence and intimidation to achieve a political objective.”

Wyden said violence is “always unacceptable,”

See **WYDEN**, page 11

Husum man joins local police force

■ By Jacob Bertram
Columbia Gorge News

The Bingen-White Salmon Police Department has added another officer to its ranks, and this time, the department did not have to look very far.

Officer Joshua Lewis, 24, has been training with the B-WSPD since mid-April of this year, observing his colleagues at work for the first few months, then transferring to the Basic Law Enforcement Academy, the mandatory training program for all city- and county-level officers in the state, for the next four months. There, he received some of the highest honors in the program, including top of his class in



Joshua Lewis

academics, practicals, and overall performance.

“It was a very rewarding experience to say the least,” said Lewis.

“I was very proud of him,” said Chief Mike Hepner during a Dec. 2 council meeting.

Lewis is in phase two of four of his training: the application phase. In phase two he is handling his own calls and making contacts. Currently riding along with field training officers, Lewis will begin riding solo in March.

Lewis told *Columbia Gorge News* that he was grateful to end up in the community where he was raised. Lewis, a Husum native and Columbia High School graduate, had his career ambitions revealed to him towards the end of his high school career. His senior project entailed Lewis reporting on career opportunities within Bingen-White Salmon

Police Department and in law enforcement in general. This project is what made him look into the job even further, and five years later, Lewis found himself back at the place where it all began.

“Being able to secure a position here was a blessing for me because it was my home community,” said Lewis. He said he sees himself serving in this community for a while. Since his mission with Latter-day Saints in Africa and his college experience at the Brigham Young University on the island of O’ahu, Hawaii, Lewis knew he always wanted to end up back at the place he calls home.

“I’ve traveled around and I know that this is the place I know I want to settle down, turn it into a lasting career,” said Lewis. “I feel like it is an opportunity for me to give back to the community that has given me so much.”

Interim superintendent among those to be interviewed

THE DALLES — Three candidates for superintendent of North Wasco County District 21 (NWCSO) have been named and interviews scheduled following a unanimous decision by the school board to move forward following an executive session and work session of the school board Jan. 5.

The candidates selected for interviews are Carolyn Bernal of Camarillo, Calif.; Jeff Dillon of Caldwell, Idaho; and Theresa Peters of The Dalles.

Final interviews with the school board are scheduled for Thursday, Jan. 21, with a final decision by the board expected Friday, Jan. 22, according to a press release from the district.

A Candidate Public Forum is planned Friday, Jan. 15, at 6 p.m. and will be presented electronically via the district’s Facebook page (@northwascoschools). Each candidate is scheduled for 30 minutes, with feedback forms available for community input. Feedback will be provided to the school board for review.

Jose Aparicio, co-chair of the D21 Board, encouraged members of the community to be involved. “This is not about just the board, but about what the community

See **FINALISTS**, page 8

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