

EAST OREGONIAN

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HERMISTON Fire districts to try again on merger

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

A combined Hermiston-Stanfield fire district will be back on the ballot in May after being denied by Hermiston voters in 2014.

The new ballot measure would tax the district at \$1.75 per \$1,000 of assessed value, down from the \$2 per \$1,000 the district tried for a year ago, and add around-the-clock staffing to Hermiston's two outlying stations.

Hermiston Fire & Emergency Services Chief Scott Stanton told the Hermiston City Council on Monday that the combined district would allow him to increase staffing levels at all three Hermiston fire stations.

Stanton said currently his department was averaging four delays of service a month when someone called for an ambulance or fire truck and there was no one available to respond. There were also 36 "code reds" a month when one more ambulance call would have resulted in a delay.

"Eventually it's going to cost someone their life or the loss of their property," Stanton said. "That's just a fact."

Hermiston Fire & Emergency Services was formed in 1998 with a tax rate of \$1.20 per \$1,000 of assessed value. Stanton said that is still the fire district rate today, while comparably-sized districts in the state are averaging \$2.04 per \$1,000.

Meanwhile, the cost of everything from PERS benefits to medical supplies has "increased dramatically," he said.

The fire district also loses tax revenue because of the enterprise zone and urban renewal zone, while still having to protect the structures built in them.

He said Hermiston's rate of 181 calls per

"It will be the same people, same stations, same equipment."
— Scott Stanton,
Hermiston Fire & Emergency Services Chief

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HERMISTON



Ric "The Shermanator" Sherman talks to students about the Christmas Express during a pep rally at Sandstone Middle School on Tuesday in Hermiston. *Staff photo by E.J. Harris*

Old traditions, new volunteers

'Shermanator' inspires Sandstone students to collect food for Christmas Express



Ric "The Shermanator" Sherman throws confetti at students during a pep rally for the Christmas Express on Tuesday at Sandstone Middle School in Hermiston. *Staff photo by E.J. Harris*

By SEAN HART
East Oregonian

Forget the snow and holiday decorations. Nothing rings in the season of giving like a visit from the Shermanator.

Longtime Hermiston middle school music teacher Ric Sherman has been retired for 13 years, but he returns each year in costume to reprise the role he created to inspire children to collect canned foods for the Christmas Express campaign.

"I come out in a crazy-looking outfit, and it gets the kids all fired up," he said. "There is a serious side to it. It helps them realize the importance of (Christmas Express). It's a great civics lesson for the kids."

Christmas Express began in 1969 when Dick Hodge, a local insurance agent, asked then-police chief Bob Shannon to help distribute leftover toys to children who may not have received gifts that year. The police department now coordinates the annual charity drive that distributes food boxes with a turkey and other staples to 500 local families

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Shippers still harbor hopes for Port of Portland service

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
EO Media Group

SALEM — Severely diminished container service at the Port of Portland hasn't yet irreversibly changed shipping strategies, but that pattern won't hold forever, according to a freight expert.

Importers and exporters largely hope that ocean carriers will eventually return to the port's container terminal after Hanjin and Hapag-Lloyd pulled out earlier this year

and eliminated almost all container service, said Dan Smith, principal of the Tioga Group transportation consultancy firm.

So far, those hopes have prevented shippers from closing distribution centers or making other changes unlikely to be reversed if ocean carrier service returned to the container terminal, Smith said last week during a legislative hearing in Salem.

Hanjin and Hapag-Lloyd, which represented more than 90 percent

of container traffic at the port, said their decision was based on low productivity, which the container terminal operator — ICTSI Oregon — blamed on work slowdowns by the longshoremen's union.

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union, on the other hand, faulted inadequate equipment and safety practices as the cause of slowed container movements.

A broader labor contract dispute between ILWU and terminal operators aggravated the situation, with

West Coast slowdowns occurring in late 2014 and early 2015 before the issue was settled earlier this year.

Companies that buy from importers and exporters are now using the unpredictability caused by the slowdowns as a negotiating lever, which may lead to some distribution centers becoming uneconomical — thus prompting shippers to close them and divert traffic to other areas, Smith said.

"We are getting closer to a cliff," he said.

For now, though, shippers are "coping" by using trucks and trains to send goods to ports in Seattle and Tacoma, Smith said.

Bill Wyatt, executive director of the Port of Portland, said the longshoremen's union, ICTSI Oregon and the port are still engaged in litigation but they're also in "significant conversations" and he's more optimistic about a resolution than six to eight months ago.

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In this 2010 file photo, traffic is backed up on the New York State Thruway in Harriman, N.Y., due to a fatal crash on the northbound side of Interstate 87 in Woodbury. Government estimates show U.S. traffic deaths rose 8 percent for the first six months of 2015, following a slight decrease in 2014. *AP Photo/Mike Groll, File*

U.S. traffic deaths rise sharply in 2015

By TOM KRISHER
AP Auto Writer

DETROIT — After declining for most of the past decade, traffic deaths spiked 8 percent in the first half of this year, prompting a call from the nation's highway safety chief to find ways to reduce the human errors that cause most fatalities.

The new estimate released Tuesday by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration comes just as millions of Americans prepare to hit the road for the Thanksgiving holiday. AAA predicts that 42 million people will drive 50 miles or more over the coming weekend.

Officials released a final number of fatal crashes for 2014, which showed a decline of 0.1 percent. This year, lower gas prices and an improving economy are prompting people to travel more. Americans drove 1.54 trillion miles in the first half of 2015, up 3.5 percent from the same period in 2014, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

But NHTSA Administrator Mark Rosekind said that not all of the increase could be attributed to people driving more miles. He suspects that texting and other distractions while using smartphones was part of the

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