

Counties to collaborate on B2H comments

Deadline extended to January 22

By **GEORGE PLAGEN**
East Oregonian

Umatilla and Morrow county planners will work together on comments to the Bureau of Land Management seeking common ground on where to build the proposed Boardman to Hemingway Transmission Line.

As the project's lead environmental review agency, the BLM is responsible for coming up with a preferred alternative for the 300-mile line. Their current preference is to follow Interstate 84 from Boardman to just west of Pendleton, before breaking south to avoid the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

The counties, however, say that proposal would interfere with too many homes and farms on either side of the highway. They want the line to run significantly farther south, but just how far south remains to be determined.

Both counties are concerned with protecting high-value agriculture within their borders. Transmission towers can interrupt farming operations and, in some cases, take swaths of land out of production.

Boardman to Hemingway has been in the works for a decade, proposed by Boise-based Idaho Power to share electricity with the Columbia Basin during times of peak demand. The trick has been identifying the route with the fewest impacts to farms and wildlife, while keeping

the project affordable. Early estimates have pegged the project at anywhere between \$890-\$940 million.

Morrow County Planning Director Carla McLane and Umatilla County Senior Planner Bob Waldher plan to meet and collaborate on comments to the BLM. Comments are due Jan. 22 after the agency granted counties a two-week extension.

Umatilla County commissioners say they favor the most southerly alternative, while Morrow County is focused primarily on placing 22 miles of line along the west side of Bombing Range Road on Navy land. Waldher said the goal is to identify and refine a route that works for both counties.

"Our hope is the Umatilla South route can tie into the

west side of Bombing Range Road," he said.

McLane said most of their conversation will likely center on how far south the line needs to go to balance everyone's interests. They hope to make site visits as early as next week.

The Morrow County Court held a public meeting on Boardman to Hemingway on Wednesday, and McLane said residents seem to understand the project is needed. It's just a matter of compromising on the location.

"At the end of the day, the no-action alternative just isn't reasonable," she said. "This really does provide additional reliability to our power supply."

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ATHENA

School district considers going for a piece of \$123 million

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

The Athena-Weston School District is the latest to consider entering the Senate Bill 447 sweepstakes.

The bill established a \$123 million pot for school capital improvements over the next two years, and any given district can access up to an \$8 million grant if it passes a local bond measure for the same amount.

With the district's current bond set to expire later this year and the lion's share of the state's money allocated for bonds passed during the May 17 election, the Athena-Weston School Board started discussing pursuing the bond in the spring.

Interim Superintendent Jim Reger went over possible options at a public meeting Thursday at Weston-McEwen High School.

The crux of the Reger's presentation was whether to continue the current bond rate of \$1.01 per assessed \$1,000 in home value or increase the rate to \$1.45, the difference between \$2.8 million in revenue over the life of the 10-year bond and \$4 million.

If the district wins the state grant, those figures would be doubled.

The last bond paid for capital improvements like electrical work, air conditioning units and new roofing, and a new bond would pay for similar improvements across the district's three schools, with a greater focus on school safety.

Reger said Pendleton Police Chief Stuart Roberts conducted a security assessment of the school district,

and among his recommendations was a one-touch lockdown system and key card-enabled locks.

The handful of people that attended the meeting were supportive of the higher bond rate, even without a matching state grant, a sentiment Reger said was echoed at a public meeting at Weston Middle School Wednesday.

What appealed to the audience members who spoke was that even with the \$1.45 bond rate, the rate for the Athena-Weston school system would still be significantly lower than bond rates in surrounding districts.

The school board will decide whether to pursue the grant at a meeting Monday and will vote on the bond and its amount at a later date.

If the board does decide to seek a bond, it will do so without a permanent superintendent.

Reger took the job on an interim basis in July after former superintendent Jerry Copeland resigned to become the human resources director at the InterMountain Education Service District.

A longtime employee of the Milton-Freewater Unified School District, where he once also served as interim superintendent, Reger will fill the superintendent role for the 2015-2016 school year while the board searches for a permanent replacement.

There's one more public meeting on the bond, which will be held at Athena Elementary School Jan. 14 at 6:30 p.m.

Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.

HERMISTON

Head Start gathering focuses on literacy

East Oregonian

All 205 employees of Umatilla-Morrow Head Start came together in Hermiston on Friday to kick off a year-long focus on literacy in 2016.

UMCHS director Maureen McGrath said in a news release that equipping children and families to succeed starts with equipping teachers and other staff with the skills to help them.

"Creating a cutting-edge team begins with sharing the latest knowledge and techniques with our staff," she said.

Research has linked early literacy to better grades, higher graduation rates and more success in adult life, which is why Umatilla-Morrow Head Start is making it a strong focus for 2016.

The day-long conference, held at New Hope Church, had a Dr. Seuss theme that promoted the idea that stories can be transformative. Participants attended sessions with titles like "Cradling Literacy" and "The ABCs of Family Engagement and Literacy."

During a mid-day exercise,



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

Umatilla-Morrow Head Start staff build a robot out of cardboard boxes during a staff training in Hermiston.

staff members broke into groups for a team-building activity in which they used craft materials to represent the story of their work at Head Start. Results included a robot programmed to increase literacy, a set of steps leading

up to a star with smiling children on top and a fire truck putting out flames labeled with problems Head Start teachers face every day.

"We work together like the fire department does to put out fires," said the staff

member called on to explain the model to the group.

Participants were challenged to go find gently used children's books to place at the Little Libraries at Belt Park and the Head Start offices.

New fair manager excited for moving challenge

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
East Oregonian

Before this week, the announcement that new Umatilla County Fair manager Don Slone is from Harney County would have been met with a shrug.

The county has been making national headlines all week, however, after armed protesters took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in protest of a five-year prison sentence handed down to local ranchers convicted of arson on federal land.

Slone got home from a Western Fairs Association conference in California on Thursday night, and said it was an interesting experience watching his little hometown of Burns in the news while he was gone.

"I don't think the town of Burns wants to be splattered across newspapers across America, but maybe some good will come of it," he said.

Slone didn't condone the armed takeover of a federal building, and said he doesn't pretend to know all of the ins and outs of the land use issues surrounding the incident. But he said he does know Steve and Dwight Hammond well and is sad to see what their family is going through after they returned to a California



Slone

prison to complete their five year sentences.

"I think an injustice was done," he said.

The controversy in Harney County has nothing to do with why Slone is leaving, however. After growing up in Burns, spending several years on the Harney County Fair Board and then managing the fair for more than 25 years, Slone said he felt it was time to seek out a new challenge.

The idea of helping move the Umatilla County Fair from its place in the center of Hermiston to the new facilities being constructed at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center is an exciting one, he said.

"It's going to be probably the biggest challenge I've encountered in my life," he said.

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— **Don Slone**, Umatilla County Fair manager

His credentials suggest it's a challenge he will embrace. At this week's conference for the Western Fair Association — which includes 11 states and Canada — Slone was made the association's 2016 treasurer, with the understanding that he will serve as vice president of the association in 2017 and president in 2018.

Slone is also serving as the president of the Oregon Fairs Association for the second time. He said that position has given him the opportunity to work with all three Umatilla County commissioners and a variety of fair board members over the year.

He has been active in the

Burns sports community over his career, coaching baseball and softball and playing in an over-30 Harney County basketball league. During his college career at Eastern Oregon State College (now Eastern Oregon University) from 1971-1973 he played basketball, baseball and soccer. He served as president of the 4H Leaders Association and was a Parks and Recreation committee member for six years.

He said he appreciates that the Umatilla County Fair has kept its focus on agriculture while other fairs have drifted from that mission. He also likes the way the Farm-City Pro Rodeo complements the fair. Slone said he loves attending other county fairs in his free time, because there is always something to learn.

"I'm not only a person who works at a fair, but I am a fan of other fairs," he said.

UMATILLA

Landing Days canceled

Firework show a go, parade still possible

East Oregonian

Umatilla has canceled its annual Landing Days event for 2016, but will still have a fireworks show.

Karen Hutchinson-Talaski, director of the Umatilla Chamber of Commerce, said volunteer support for the celebration of the town's history had been dwindling in recent years and there were not enough volunteers to go forward this year.

She said organizers will have a meeting in late spring to discuss bringing the full event back in 2017.

"We don't want this to go away," she said.

Hutchinson-Talaski said she has seen several events in the Hermiston and

Umatilla area canceled or scaled down because of a lack of volunteers.

"It's the same problem for everyone," she said. "The same people who volunteer for everything are burned out. New people need to step up."

The live music, booths and other day-long events will be missing this year, but there will still be a fireworks show at 10 p.m. on the last weekend in June. Hutchinson-Talaski said if there is enough interest the parade might still happen as well.

She said volunteers are still needed for cleanup and parking duty. The \$3 parking fee for the fireworks show will help pay for the next year's display.

To volunteer, call the Umatilla Chamber of Commerce at 541-922-4825.

Submit community news information to: community@eastoregonian.com or drop off to the attention of Tammy Malgesini at 333 E. Main St., Hermiston or Renee Struthers at 211 S.E. Byers Ave., Pendleton. Call 541-564-4539 or 541-966-0818 with questions.

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