

COLLEGE: 134 Hermiston seniors have applied for Oregon Promise

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either a diploma or GED. They must have lived in Oregon for at least 12 months and maintain at least a 2.5 grade point average. Oregon Promise was designed to fill in funding gaps, kicking in only after two other financial aid sources (Federal Pell Grants and Oregon Opportunity Grants) have been tapped. Hence, middle-income students might reap the greatest benefit.

BMCC Director of Student Financial Assistance Yadira Gonzalez says the program is a relief to many parents of high school seniors. She talks to them at college fairs, financial aid nights and FAFSA labs around the area.

“For parents who don’t qualify for anything else, this is a hope to them,” she said. “They are struggling. They’ve said this is a blessing because they won’t have to pay 100 percent of college costs.”

Students are eligible to attend community college for \$50 a term, a sizable discount from the current cost of about \$1,500 to attend full-time in Oregon.

Guidance counselor Mike Royer, of the Morrow County School District, said most of the approximately 100 seniors he advises at Irrigon and Riverside High Schools have applied.

“They’ve figured out it makes financial sense,” Royer said. “It’s great for middle income families.”

Royer said the idea of essentially free community college tuition has pushed some students who were unsure about college off the fence. Plus, some who had planned to attend four-year

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— **Yadira Gonzalez**, BMCC Director of Student Financial Assistance

universities are now looking spending some time at a community college first.

“I think community college numbers are going to go up,” he said.

Royer advised his students to apply for Oregon Promise even if they are headed somewhere else.

“It takes five minutes to fill out,” Royer said. “This is a pretty good plan B.”

Jill Gregg, coordinator of ASPIRE, Pendleton High School’s college readiness program, has pushed Oregon Promise hard to her students.

“I’d hate for them to miss out on essentially free community college,” Gregg said.

As of Wednesday, she said, about half of PHS seniors had applied and she wouldn’t be surprised to see a last-minute flurry in these final days before the deadline.

Liz Marvin, director of Project College Bound at Hermiston High School, said 134 Hermiston seniors had applied for Oregon Promise. She offers to help anyone who requests it with applications and FAFSAs.

“Next week, we’ll make a big push for any other students who have not applied,” Marvin said.

BMCC Vice President of Public Relations Casey White-Zollman is watching the FAFSA spike with

interest.

“A lot of the rise we know is due to Oregon Promise,” White-Zollman said. “Some students who once would only have applied to four-year schools are now seeing community colleges as a viable option because it’s so affordable.”

Free community college, however, may not be the only reason for the spike. Eastern Promise, an avenue for high school students to inexpensively earn college credit, is likely pulling some to BMCC, along with increased recruitment efforts by the college.

Prospective students can send FAFSAs to up to 10 schools, so it’s not clear how many considering BMCC will actually end up there. Time will tell how many will attend and how many will receive Oregon Promise grants.

Another factor is a limited pot of money. The state has set aside \$10 million for Oregon Promise.

Hartigen said state officials have estimated that approximately 7,000 students, about 20 percent of 2016 high school graduates, will benefit from Oregon Promise.

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or call 541-966-0810.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Mahlon Zehr turns on a conveyor belt that removes chicken manure from the hen house at his egg production facility outside Milton-Freewater.

CHICKENS: ‘It’s a fairly stable investment’

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raise 8.5 million eggs over the course of the year.

“It should be pretty busy here in the next couple weeks,” he said.

At 20,000 square feet, the hen house is longer than a football field and divided into three main rows where the birds are free to wander and roost. By summer, Zehr plans to turn the chickens out onto pasture, but for now he keeps them inside because of concerns about avian flu.

An avian flu outbreak affected two back yard poultry flocks around the Tri-Cities early last year. If just one of his chickens gets sick, Zehr said the entire flock would be euthanized and that would put him out of business for at least six months, possibly a year.

In the meantime, Zehr said he will build a meshed-in porch where the hens can go outside for some fresh air, while protecting them from other wild birds. The operation is cage free, which Zehr said is becoming increasingly important for consumers.

“The cage-free market is growing,” he said. “It’s what people want.”

Wilcox Farms owns all

the chickens and provides the feed, though Zehr has already invested \$1.2 million on new equipment and labor. Nearly all the technology is automated, from the ceiling lights to the conveyor belts where eggs are carried off and sorted.

“It’s automated enough to where I should be able to handle it myself,” Zehr said.

When the chickens are ready to lay eggs, they will head into one of many nesting boxes layered up and down each row. The eggs drop gently onto conveyors, which twist their way to the front of the barn. A separate line of conveyors also sweeps feathers and droppings into a nearby shed.

Zehr plans to sell the manure as fertilizer for organic farms and gardens. As for the eggs, Wilcox Farms pays by the dozen and sells at grocery stores across the Northwest.

“It’s a fairly stable investment,” Zehr said. “It’ll provide a good living for us.”

Zehr, who grew up in the Willamette Valley, moved to Milton-Freewater in 2008 to help start Blue Mountain Christian Fellowship, a

COUNCIL: Will hold public hearing and vote on Transportation System Plan proposals

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placed at the entrance to the Wal-Mart Distribution Center near Feedville Road and at the highway’s intersection with Airport Road.

The amendment recommended by the city’s planning commission would add a third signal or roundabout at what is commonly referred to as the “Hermiston Foods Driveway” between Hermiston Foods and the Wal-Mart Distribution Center. According to planning commission documents, the driveway would also become the entrance to Ranch & Home, which has begun a development application process with the city.

The update to the Transportation System Plan would list roundabouts, not traffic signals, as the preferred option for all three intersections, based on a recommendation from the Oregon Department of Transportation. Roundabouts cost about three times as much as traffic signals to install but are considered safer in situations where vehicles are traveling at speeds of 55 miles per hour before coming to a stop.

city hall to discuss the details of the Transportation System Plan proposals, followed by a public hearing and a vote during its regular 7 p.m. meeting.

- The council also will hold a public hearing and vote on a proposed annexation of .45 acres of property at 260 Theater Lane to allow the property owner to connect to municipal utilities.
- Two additional resolutions considered by the council on Monday would grant utility access easements to Umatilla Electric Cooperative along Geer Road and Theater Sports Park.
- The council also will consider appointing former Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center board chair

Ed Brookshier back onto the EOTEC board to replace David Bothum. Brookshier stepped down as the city’s board representative in December to make room for city manager Byron Smith after city councilors asked that Smith be given a spot on the board in exchange for \$600,000 from the city for construction costs.

The Farm-City Pro Rodeo board is recommending that Brookshier become their new representative to the board after Bothum resigned in order to bid on the contract for building EOTEC’s new rodeo arena.

Contact Jade McDowell at jmcdowell@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4536.

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