

HERMISTON

Hotel taxes may be aimed at EOTEC

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

The Hermiston City Council will consider a resolution Monday that would help make sure the travelers expected to use the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center the most will be the ones paying for it.

The resolution would add the event center project currently under construction to the list of things funded by the transient room tax, an 8 percent tax on hotel rooms within the city limits.

While EOTEC will host some local events, such as the Umatilla County Fair and Farm-City Pro Rodeo, the vision for the project is to bring in conferences and other out-of-town visitors instead of competing with local venues for events already being held in Umatilla County. The project is expected to need money from the city and Umatilla County for its operational costs—at least in its early years—and city administrators would rather see that money come from the hotel room tax than from the general fund, which is made up of property tax revenue.

“This is an opportunity to have people who are intended to use EOTEC pay for it,” said Mark Morgan, assistant city manager.

EOTEC already receives some funds for marketing from hotel occupancy, through an assessment of \$2 per room per night called the tourism promotion assessment.

Under the resolution that will be presented Monday, EOTEC would be grouped in with the Hermiston Conference Center under a single “event center” line item funded by 28 percent of the total transient room tax revenue. Morgan said for many years the Hermiston Conference Center was subsidized through the general fund as well as the room tax. But efficiency in running the conference center and significant increases in room tax revenue mean

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— Mark Morgan, assistant city manager

that in the current fiscal year \$161,000 in room tax funds have been earmarked for the conference center even though the center only needs about \$90,000 for operations. If the city council adopts the proposed changes, the extra money will be dedicated to EOTEC in the future.

The resolution also simplifies the math on the room tax fund (Parks and Recreation grants current receive 15 percent of 5/8 of the tax, for example) to flat percentages, and puts the approximately \$8,500 generated by the rounding remainders into a dedicated fund for maintenance on the Hermiston Family Aquatic Center.

On Monday the city council will also be asked to approve a stop sign on the westbound side of Joshua Court where it crosses Southwest 10th Street.

One of its final items of business will be approval of a report summarizing a goal-setting session the city council and department heads held in January. General goals to come out of that session include creation of a capital improvement plan, a public transportation plan, an infrastructure plan and an economic development plan. City leaders also want to continue to focus on downtown revitalization, parks and recreation development, EOTEC, improving service levels and assessing the best uses for current city facilities.

The city council meeting will be 7 p.m. on April 25 at city hall, 180 N.E. Second St.

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PROMISE: BMCC tripled price per credit

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The state is replicating the program in five other places in Oregon. In 2014, then-Chief Education Officer Nancy Golden called the program a model to replicate.

“This is the best model we have going so far,” Golden said. “Nobody has really cracked the code on accelerated learning like Eastern Promise.”

Partners include the InterMountain Education Service District, Blue Mountain Community College, Treasure Valley Community College, Eastern Oregon University, Malheur ESD and Eastern Oregon high schools.

The idea, say the Eastern Promise creators, was to ease high school students into college with success already under their belts and with less financial pain. More students would finish high school, enroll in college and, once there, they would have more chance of graduating. Four years down the road it’s worth asking if Eastern Promise is living up to the promise.

The answer depends on who you ask.

Skeptics suggest that Eastern Promise is a way for colleges to make extra money, that high school students don’t do as well in subsequent classes as traditional college students, that college instructors are overloaded and that the failure rate is too high.

Here’s a quote from the Oregon Educational Association’s Community College Council when the group considered whether Eastern Promise should be expanded statewide.

The white paper decried “the tremendous investment of time” for college faculty and high school instructors and the possible inconsistencies in standards between professional learning communities. The model requires colleges and high schools to work together: High schools provide the teachers and college instructors determine course content and proficiency assessments. The teachers, joined through learning communities, jointly grade student’s work.

From the OEA paper: “Twenty-two Eastern Promise writing evaluators (college and high school educators) collectively read 694 pieces of student writing. The lead college professor alone spent 221 hours reading 129 portfolios for quality control.”

BMCC English instructor

Alison Timmons admitted the work load is intense.

“We process the portfolios that we can while also juggling our own workloads,” she said. “However, we are definitely moving in a more positive direction to help assess the high schoolers through better placement processes.”

Recently, some key Eastern Promise leaders teed up objections to the program and addressed them one by one. The group included Mulvihill, her husband and InterMountain Education Service District Superintendent Mark Mulvihill, BMCC President Camille Preus and BMCC Vice-President of Instruction Jim Whittaker.

Preus, wearing a look of incredulity, took on the notion that Eastern Promise is simply a cash cow for the colleges. One criticism she hears is that BMCC charged \$10 per credit at the beginning, but hiked the price later.

“We charged \$10 when we had a grant of \$1.7 million to underwrite the cost,” Preus said. “Now the tuition is \$31, one-third of regular tuition.”

She said Whittaker figured out the real costs and determined the current break-even point of \$31 per credit.

“It wasn’t a number he pulled out of the air,” she said.

Then there’s the issue of whether students who take a course in high school do as well in the next class in sequence as those who took the class from college instructors. About three years ago, Whittaker heard rumblings about this from his writing faculty.

“They said they did not think students who took Writing 121 in high school did as well in Writing 122 as students who took Writing 121 in college,” Whittaker said.

He pulled the students’ records for the past three years.

“There was no statistical difference in how they did

in Writing 122,” Whittaker said. “The faculty will tell you anecdotally they don’t do as well, but the data does not support that.”

To be clear, some of these students had taken dual credit classes, not Eastern Promise classes. The difference? To teach dual credit, the high school teacher needs a master’s degree in the content area. With Eastern Promise, teachers need at least three years of experience, but not a Master’s in the subject area.

Some critics consider the Eastern Promise class failure rate as too high.

“Our success rate is not 100 percent by any means,” Mark Mulvihill said. “It’s more like 50 percent (in writing courses). These are hard classes that the kid may not be ready for.”

And what of the black marks that land on college transcripts of those who fail? Might they deter a student from attending college?

“We’ve been debating this for years,” Mulvihill said. “We don’t want a student penalized before even getting to college, yet it’s a college class. They can’t have it both ways.”

Administrators are discovering that the key is better counseling and vetting before registration ever happens. Some students might be better to wait. But, even if a student fails, Mulvihill asked, “What’s the worst that can happen? They still took a rigorous class that will prepare them for college.” A student can wipe out a failing grade by taking the class again and passing.

Lea Mathieu teaches several classes at Lone High School where students may earn college credit. She cited the program’s “obvious financial benefit to families” and “the raising of the academic bar.” The downside, she said, is increased pressure on students to do more, scheduling challenges and increased teacher workload. On balance, she gives Eastern Promise a qualified

thumbs up.

“I appreciate the opportunity to let those who are willing to put in the work get a head start on their college education,” she said.

Whittaker said the success rate is rising. Classes include biology, chemistry, communications, computer science, history, math and others. He agreed that Eastern Promise increases the burden on college faculty.

“Eastern Promise puts a huge load on faculty, but they do get compensated for it,” Whittaker said.

They are at their limit, he said, and the college won’t be adding other classes, such as Writing 122, any time soon.

“Capacity is an issue,” he said. “We can’t handle any more.”

With all the growing pains, follow-up studies show that the program is working, said Kris Mulvihill. She said students are graduating at a higher rate, more are going to college and when they get there, more of them stay.

“Is it perfect? No,” Preus said. “We’re stretching the boundaries as far as we think we can or we should. What we’re seeing is a snap-back. Some think we’ve stretched it too far.”

Mark Mulvihill said any program that stretches comfort zones draws criticism.

“It has changed the culture, but we don’t have any illusion that this isn’t hard work and that there’s no criticism that comes along with it. Anything this transformational, people are going to question it and not know all the facts.”

Mulvihill said he thinks all the rough spots and objections fade away when students such as Edith Velasco are put at the center.

“Eastern Promise is not going away,” he said, “because it’s right for the kids.”

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