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## PENDLETON



Culinary arts teacher Kristin Swaggart gets a hug from junior Marin Kennedy after an assembly where Swaggart was named a winner in the Farmers Insurance Teachers Dream Big Challenge on Tuesday at Pendleton High School. *Staff photo by E.J. Harris*

# SWAGGART GETS THE SWAG

Teacher wins \$100K for food truck for culinary program

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**  
*East Oregonian*

Pendleton High School students rushed the Warburg Court Tuesday morning, a full day before the Buckaroos boys basketball team will play its first home game.

Instead of a basketball win, students swarmed the court to celebrate culinary arts teacher Kristin Swaggart, who had just been named a winner in the Farmers Insurance Teachers Dream Big Challenge.

It was their support that helped spur Swaggart's "Chef K Everyday" campaign toward the \$100,000 prize, which will pay for a food truck for the culinary program.

The surprise announcement was made during a "Buck Pride" assembly, a semi-regular school spirit event where students are awarded prizes and privileged parking spots.

Swaggart was throwing prizes into bleachers filled with students when a project that had previously been displaying parking spot winners suddenly switched to a slide congratulating Swaggart, which prompted Farmers Insurance officials to emerge with a giant novelty check for \$100,000.



Students gather around culinary arts teacher Kristin Swaggart as she holds her check after being named a winner in the Farmers Insurance Teachers Dream Big Challenge during an "Buck Pride" assembly on Tuesday at Pendleton High School. *Staff photo by E.J. Harris*

Following the big reveal, Swaggart told the students surrounding her that she wanted to use the success of her own campaign to inspire them to achieve their own goals. "I want to challenge all of you to dream

big," she said. After hugging and greeting the dozens of students who individually congratulated her, Swaggart said she was grateful for the way the community rallied around her cause.

See **FOOD/8A**

## HEPPNER

# Vacant land to become downtown fitness park

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**  
*East Oregonian*

Plans for a new outdoor fitness park are coming together in Heppner, which would include a circuit training area, mixed sports court and large grassy field behind the Morrow County Agriculture Museum on Riverside Avenue.

City Manager Kim Cutsforth said the park will make use of vacant county-owned land and provide badly needed green space for the community. An existing basketball court and the Willow Creek Water Park are also located nearby.

"We're going to incorporate it into the whole complex down there," Cutsforth said. "It seemed to be a good fit."

The idea for a fitness park started with Greg Grant, athletic director at Heppner High School. While driving through La Grande in August, he noticed what looked like a small gym outside Mountain Valley Therapy, and stopped to take a closer look.

Grant spoke with the clinic owner, and later pitched the concept to Cutsforth. By adding circuit training equipment such as push-up and pull-up bars, balance beams and sit-up benches, he said the park could help both kids and adults to become more healthy and active.

"I think it will be something everybody can enjoy," Grant said.

Cutsforth — who works part-time for the Willow Creek Park District, in addition to serving as city manager — has spearheaded the development, with permission from the Heppner City Council. The park would be maintained by the district, not the city, she said.

Cutsforth approached the Morrow County Court in October, which agreed to donate a third-acre of land along Riverside Avenue to the park district. That's where she said they will install circuit training stations, restrooms and a mixed sports court for activities like pickleball.

The county also gave permission to use more than an acre of adjacent land, where Cutsforth said they will lay down new grass and install irrigation. She said there is a huge demand for grassy fields in the community, with local soccer and tee-ball teams often left scrapping for space.

"That's common knowledge if you live in Heppner," she said. "This still isn't big enough, but it will be something."

The land is currently empty, riddled with weeds and puncture vine. The county agriculture museum has retained the right to take back the property for its own development if necessary, though Larry Mills, museum secretary and treasurer, said that would be years down the road, if at all.

Mills said he believes the fitness park will make a great addition to the area.

"We think it will be a great deal, not only for the museum, but for the entire community," Mills said.

Engineers estimate the cost for the entire project will run just under \$300,000. Cuts-

See **PARK/8A**

## HERMISTON

# Renovated, historic RoeMarks building reopens

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
*East Oregonian*

One of downtown Hermiston's most distinctive buildings is a center of commerce once more.

The former RoeMarks Men's and Western Wear building on the corner of Main Street and Northeast Second Street sat empty for nearly four years before Simmons Insurance Group purchased it in May. After hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of renovations on the two-story brick building, Simmons Insurance Group held a ribbon-cutting on their new headquarters Tuesday.

"This is our hub. This is our home," managing partner Jacob Neighbors told the group gathered for the celebration.

Simmons Insurance Group was founded in Hermiston in 1974 but has since grown to about 100 employees in 20 locations. Hermiston is still the company's headquarters, however, and almost half of the employees are there. Neighbors said the move to the bigger space for administrative offices will allow for continued growth.

Managing partner Justin Simmons thanked those who transformed the former western wear store into an open, modern-looking workspace. He said helping fill the long-empty building was important to him and to his brother-in-law Neighbors because they had grown up in the community.

"We're really excited," he said. "What we wanted to do was revitalize

See **ROEMARKS/8A**



Justin Simmons and Jacob Neighbors open the RoeMarks building. *Staff photo by E.J. Harris*

