

PENDLETON

Fire destroys family's home

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian



Staff photo by Phil Wright

A home at 1525 S.E. Alexander Place caught fire Tuesday morning in Pendleton. No one was injured, but the house was severely damaged.

A fire that started near a furnace and water heater burned through a Pendleton home Tuesday morning and killed three of the family's pets.

Andi Davis said she lived at the house at 1525 S.E. Alexander Place since she was 8, and her mother and stepfather, Carol and Ralph McCall, still live there. But as far as she knew no one was home except for their dogs. Two large dogs escaped the fire, said Pendleton assistant fire chief Shawn Penninger.

The first reports of smoke coming from the back of the house arrived at 8:45 a.m. and Pendleton Fire and Ambulance were on the scene soon after. Fire Chief Mike Ciraulo said flames were showing by the time crews arrived.

Pendleton sent three fire engines and their attack was stalled as they called for more from nearby agencies. Ciraulo said a team tried to attack the interior of the house, but that was too dangerous.

"The roof was collapsing," he said.

Firefighters hauling hoses and ladders also had to be careful just walking. The

freezing weather made for a thin layer of ice over streets and concrete. A couple of crew members slipped on the slick surfaces.

Teams hit the home with water from the front and the back. Flames still shot high above the pitched roof of the one-story home. Davis, tearful, watched from the edge of a nearby yard. She said it would have been better if the fire was quick, but watching the home slowly burn was torture.

"It's like a play-by-play of every memory you have," she said.

Davis said her single

mother raised her and her sister, and this place always felt like home.

"She worked hard for everything she had," Davis said of her mom. "She didn't deserve to lose it."

As firefighters got control of the blaze, an ambulance was dispatched to a two-semi wreck on Clark Lane and Airport Road near Woodpecker Truck.

There were no injuries, Penninger said, because the trucks were moving so slowly but couldn't stop because a layer of ice about 1/8 of an inch thick was covering the roadway.

Committee turns to state for help on groundwater nitrates

By GEORGE PAVLEN
East Oregonian

A volunteer committee grappling with groundwater contamination in the Lower Umatilla Basin is reaching out to the state for additional help.

The Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area, or LUBGWMA, was declared in 1990 due to elevated levels of nitrates in groundwater. Nitrates come from a variety of sources, though the primary culprit is fertilizer, according to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

The advisory committee is charged with writing a new action plan designed to curb the level of groundwater nitrates in the area, which spans 550 square miles and encompasses six communities in Umatilla and Morrow counties: Hermiston, Stanfield, Echo, Umatilla, Boardman and Irrigon.

The committee reached out to Oregon Solutions in October, a program that serves at the pleasure of the governor's office to leverage state resources for local projects. On Monday, Oregon Solutions staff met with the committee in Hermiston and said they hoped to finish assessing the group's proposal by next month.

Pete Dalke, senior project manager for Oregon Solutions, said they are trying to get more specific feedback from committee members, such as major issues posed by groundwater nitrates and the urgency to address the situation immediately.

"It's hard for us to engage if there isn't some driver, or some timeline," Dalke said. "You've got to help us with what we need to bring to you

"I think there was enough positive feedback in the meeting (Monday). It should resonate that this is a definite need."

— Clive Kaiser, LUBGWMA committee

to help you move forward." Tamra Mabbott, Umatilla County planning director, said the Groundwater Management Area is affecting economic development by preventing some businesses from building or expanding.

"There are businesses that want to come in that can't locate here, even if they have enough water, because of limitations of land application of wastewater," Mabbott said. "I think there's a whole host of things that would warrant Oregon Solutions, if they could help the group."

Oregon's Groundwater Protection Act requires DEQ to declare a Groundwater Management Area if contamination exceeds certain levels. In the case of nitrates, the trigger is 7 milligrams per liter, or 70 percent of the federal drinking water standard.

The Lower Umatilla Basin came to exceed that mark through a number of different land uses, though DEQ says an overwhelming majority of those leached nitrates — 81.6 percent — come from the region's vast irrigated farms. Pastures make up another 8.1 percent, and food processors account for 4.6 percent.

An action plan was developed in 1997 with voluntary actions to reduce nitrates, though after 20 years the results have been mixed. DEQ data shows nitrates are still increasing overall in the basin, though not as sharply as in years past.

The LUBGWMA

committee is now working on a second action plan, which chairman Clive Kaiser said is nearly ready for peer review. Kaiser, an extension horticulturist for Oregon State University in Milton-Freewater, said he feels Oregon Solutions could help them put their plan into action.

"I think there was enough positive feedback in the meeting (Monday)," Kaiser said. "It should resonate that this is a definite need."

In a previous interview with the East Oregonian, Phil Richerson, hydrogeologist for DEQ in Pendleton, said it will likely take decades to realize the necessary, basin-wide improvement. Changes in agricultural practices and technology, including more efficient watering and fertilizing, have helped, but Richerson said there is still work to do.

"I think there's room for improvement," Richerson said.

The basin is also bracing for potentially more mitigated irrigation water available from the Columbia River, which would add even more farmland to Eastern Oregon.

Dealing with groundwater can be a difficult task, Richerson said, since the resource is often out of sight and out of mind.

"I do think we'll be able to find a solution," he said. "It's a complicated thing."

Contact George Pavlen at gpavlen@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0825.

Eastern Oregon schools get first look at new state tip line

Students will be able to text, email or use an app

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

If a local student has public safety concerns, they've long been able to call an anonymous tip line to share them.

Starting this week, many Eastern Oregon students can now also text, email or use an app to let authorities know if they think something is wrong.

Several Eastern Oregon school districts are involved in the pilot project for the Oregon School Safety Tip Line, a new Oregon State Police initiative.

According to InterMountain Education Service District superintendent Mark Mulvihill, the tip line went live on Monday for the Pendleton, Ione and Morrow County school districts.

The Umatilla, Echo and Pilot Rock school districts will be able to access the line by the end of the week and the Stanfield School District next week.

The origins of the tip line go back to 2014, when the state Legislature created the Oregon Task Force on School Safety.

The task force recommended creating a new tip line to replace the Department of Justice line already in place, and the Legislature complied during the 2016 session, passing a bill that directed \$1 million to establish the new tip line with the OSP.

As OSP selected a vendor and looked to launch the new program, Mulvihill and Pendleton police chief Stuart Roberts were garnering attention for their efforts to improve school security infrastructure and communication in schools across the IMESD.

Roberts said OSP reached out to him to see if schools in Umatilla County would be interested in piloting the project.

He convinced OSP to expand the pilot project to schools in the IMESD, and now seven are signed up with more to come.

With most school shootings, Roberts said there are students who know something beforehand, but don't always report that information.

Roberts said one of the strengths of the new tip line is all of the options it affords students — children may be more comfortable texting, emailing or using an in-app function instead of a voice call.

Students who contact the tip line will go through the vendor's technicians in Louisiana before the information is passed on to police, school officials or other local authorities, depending on the situation.

The line between notifying police and school officials is a fine one, Roberts said, but he trusts that the vendor will notify both entities if it is unclear.

All tip line interactions and their results will be logged into a database that schools can access, a feature Roberts said will make it

easier for authorities to stay on the same page.

In the past, Roberts said individuals would receive information about a public safety concern but didn't always share it with others.

"Most of these people have busy lives and didn't take time to initiate the report," he said.

At the pilot stage, Roberts said there's still details that need to be worked out, like how school districts will coordinate the tip line database with the records they already keep.

"This is still one of the air bubbles that needs to be burped out," he said.

Brad Bixler, the Pendleton School District human resources director, said Pendleton will begin to roll out the tip line as it gets materials from the OSP and teachers will take time out of their classes to inform students about it.

Bixler said district administrators have been assigned to provide around-the-clock response if an issue is reported.

Bixler said the district can benefit from the more advanced reporting functions from the tip line, which will give school officials a better sense of the public safety trends going on in the district.

Students can contact the tip line at 844-472-3367 or via email at tip@safeoregon.com. The mobile app can be downloaded at www.safeoregon.com.

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

PENDLETON Third cannabis store approved

East Oregonian

A third recreational marijuana store was approved by the Pendleton Planning Commission last week.

The store — owned by Michael Ekblad of Hermiston — will be located at 2003 S.W. Emigrant Ave., a former Tom Denchel Ford dealership.

City planner George Clough said Ekblad's store was represented by its manager, Amy Brown.

Maureen McCormmach, the chairwoman of the planning commission, said a meeting attendee, Robert Tally, questioned the owner's character and got into an argument with one of the other audience members before leaving.

McCormmach said she told Tally that the planning commission's sole responsibility was to determine whether the marijuana shop met the city's zoning rules. Character concerns should be addressed with the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, the state agency that conducts background checks on all marijuana retailers.

This is the third cannabis retailer the commission has approved, following Pendleton Cannabis and Kind Leaf Pendleton.

All three will have to receive licenses from the city and state before they can open.

HERMISTON

De la Cruz honored for work on Hispanic Advisory Committee

East Oregonian

Former Hispanic Advisory Committee chair Eddie de la Cruz was honored Monday night by the Hermiston City Council.

De la Cruz helped begin the Hispanic Advisory Committee about four and a half years ago. Since that time the committee won the National League of Cities' Cultural Diversity Award in 2013 and has hosted monthly public meetings in Spanish and English that are often standing-room only.

"You took the ball and ran with it," mayor David Drotzmann said when he presented a plaque to de la Cruz. "Your committee has done a phenomenal job."

City councilors Rod Hardin, Manuel Gutierrez and Clara Beas Fitzgerald praised de la Cruz for his work in making the city a more inclusive place and providing a place for Latino members of the community to feel more comfortable airing concerns or learning about city programs.

"It has been excellent, so thank you Eddie," Gutierrez said.

De la Cruz left the Hispanic Advisory Committee last fall after moving to Texas, but was back in town this week for business reasons.

De la Cruz said he was honored to have been able to help the city get the committee started.

"It has made a difference and opened a lot of doors," he said.

Jose Garcia is the committee's new chair.

HERMISTON City issues call to action on downtown revitalization

East Oregonian

Anyone interested in taking action to help revitalize Hermiston's downtown is invited to a meeting on Feb. 28.

The meeting, planned for 5:30-7:30 p.m. at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center, 1705 E. Airport Road, Hermiston, will be to discuss needs for downtown and will end with participants breaking into groups to tackle specific needs.

Presenters include Sheri Stuart, Oregon Main Street coordinator; Emma Porricolo, Hermiston's Main Street program coordinator; and Mark Morgan, assistant city manager.

Porricolo has been interviewing downtown stakeholders, including business owners and property owners,

and has identified five major themes: a need for more retail and restaurants, a need for more downtown events, a perceived lack of parking, needed building upgrades/upkeep, and beautification.

The second hour of the meeting will consist of breaking into task forces with the goal of recruiting and establishing groups that will create action plans for tackling the issues listed above.

"This meeting will be both informational, and action-oriented," Porricolo said in a news release. "Everyone who is interested in seeing a vibrant downtown is invited to come learn what the priorities of downtown stakeholders are, and seize on an opportunity to volunteer on one of these committees and capitalize on the momentum that is building downtown."

STUDENT OF THE WEEK

Justin Maret

UMATILLA HIGH SCHOOL

Justin is a leader on the football field and basketball court, as well as within the school. He serves on the ASB team and is a member of the robotics team, as well as other clubs. Justin is always polite and considerate. He is well liked by staff and students. He shows integrity in all that he does. Justin pushes himself by taking challenging courses and is ranked in the top 20% of his class.

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