



EAST OREGONIAN

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PENDLETON

Schools superintendent steps down

Will stay on for rest of school year during search for replacement



Andy Kovach

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

Seven months into the job, superintendent Andy Kovach announced his resignation from the Pendleton School District.

The Pendleton School Board unanimously accepted his resignation at a meeting Tuesday. His resignation is effective June 30, giving the board time to find a replacement before the new school year.

"My resignation is for personal

reasons and this decision was made in consultation with my family," he said in a prepared statement toward the end of the meeting.

In a brief interview after the meeting, Kovach declined to elaborate on the reason for his departure.

Board chairwoman Debbie McBee thanked Kovach for his service but didn't comment further during the meeting. No other board members made statements either.

Kovach's sudden resignation comes a few weeks after the school

board met with him behind closed doors to discuss his mid-year evaluation, the latest of three "executive session" meetings the board held to talk about Kovach's job performance since he started July 1.

In a previous interview, board chairwoman Debbie McBee said the numerous discussions were meant to provide as much feedback as possible for the first-time superintendent.

Kovach was set to participate in two more closed-door meetings in March and May, the latter being the

district's standard year-end evaluation.

A public records request by the *East Oregonian* for Kovach's mid-year evaluation is still pending.

Prior to being hired by the Pendleton School District, Kovach had 25 years experience as a teacher and administrator in Crane, Nyssa and Ontario. Kovach had been the principal of Ontario High School for four years before coming to Pendleton.

Kovach has a bachelor's degree in history from Oregon State University and a master's degree in teaching

See KOVACH/10A

HERMISTON

City bundles \$6.8 million in bonds

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

The Hermiston city council approved issuance of up to \$6.8 million in bonds on Monday night, but the city won't create new taxes to pay for them.

The bonds will pay for four separate projects, each with a different revenue stream to pay them off. City manager Byron Smith said that each set of bonds will be accounted for separately, but issuing them at the same time saves tens of thousands of dollars in attorney fees and is expected to get the city a more favorable interest rate.

Between \$1.75 million and \$2.15 million will be directed toward construction at the

See BONDS/10A

Smoke, fog lead to I-84 smash-up

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

Smoke and fog Monday night drifting over Interstate 84 near Boardman contributed to a multi-vehicle crash that temporarily shut down the freeway.

Early reports of crashes came over emergency radio calls starting around 8:30 p.m. Later transmissions indicated as many as six people were injured. Emergency dispatchers called for an air ambulance, but reports soon after said the weather would not permit the flight.

The severity of the injuries was not

See CRASH/10A



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Pendleton Fire Department reservists Patrick Williamson and Melissa Griffin braved snow, ice and whiteout driving conditions to get a patient through the Columbia River Gorge on Jan. 17 for surgery at Oregon Health & Science University in Portland.

EXTRA MILES

Ambulance drive from Pendleton to Portland during winter took more than nine hours

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

Two Pendleton Fire Department reservists braved the worst of January's winter weather to deliver a patient to Portland.

Melissa Griffin and Patrick Williamson said getting their charge safe to Oregon Health & Science University for

surgery took almost 10 hours, including a stay in Hood River before finding a way around a shut down Interstate 84.

Pendleton fire chief Mike Ciraulo said the journey began with a request. St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton, called on Jan. 17 and asked the city fire and ambulance service to transport a patient to the university hospital, the

top medical center in Oregon. The patient suffered a broken femur near the attachment to her artificial hip and needed surgery.

"They needed a specialist to connect the parts that were artificial with the real bone that was broken," he said.

The same day, a major winter storm rolled over Oregon, dumping snow and

freezing rain that led the Oregon Department of Transportation to shut down much of Interstate 84.

Shawn Penninger, assistant Pendleton fire chief, said staff called the state road department to find out if the Columbia River Gorge was even open. The state agency,

See AMBULANCE/10A

Public employees blast proposed PERS reforms

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE
Capital Bureau

SALEM — In a demonstration of the fraught political territory lawmakers enter when they scrutinize the state's public pension system, firefighters, nurses, and teachers Monday testified against two Oregon Senate bills aimed at reducing the costs of that system.

The bills, both sponsored by Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, are the latest round in the Legislature's seem-

ingly perennial battle with the costs of PERS, the unfunded liability of which has been estimated to be at least \$21.8 billion.

Senate Bill 559 would require that retirement benefits be calculated using the average salary from the final five years of employment, instead of the current three years.

Senate Bill 560 would take the 6 percent of salary employees contribute, or have contributed on their behalf, to a defined contribution plan, called the Individual

Account Program and redirect it to their retirement benefits. The bill also caps the amount of salary used in benefits calculations at \$100,000.

In 2015, the Oregon Supreme Court scuttled most of a package of PERS cost reforms the Legislature passed in 2013. That decision, in a case called *Moro v. Oregon*, essentially said that the Legislature could not make cuts to benefits already accrued. Therefore, lawmakers can only alter benefits not yet earned.

The Legislature faces a compli-

cated balancing act, one that attorney William Gary, who represented the Oregon School Boards Association in the *Moro* case, compares to a game of three-dimensional chess.

Gary told lawmakers last week that they'll have to balance sound public policy, political demands and the requirements of the law.

Some school officials, such as Cheri Helt, the chair of the Bend-La Pine School Board, said Tuesday

See PERS/10A

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