

INTERSECTION: The site of multiple fatal wrecks

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The Hermiston Police Department has traffic cameras at several locations along 395, including at Southeast Fourth, Highland, Main, Elm and Theater.

According to Edmiston, the most problematic spot, which has been the site of several fatal accidents, is at Highway 395 and Elm.

"That intersection, in my opinion, is a very difficult one to enforce. It's surrounded by businesses, so it's difficult for officers to find a place to sit and observe whatever violations have occurred without causing an accident," Edmiston said.

The most recent accident at that intersection resulted in the death of a cyclist, Javier Estrada Gutierrez, who collided with a semi truck. A woman, Joan Reeske, was hit and killed by a semi truck there in 2008, and in 1974, Edmiston's own uncle, Dean Schiller, was killed at the spot.

"He was driving a motorcycle and had a passenger with him when they were struck," Edmiston said. "I do not believe any charges were filed at the time. Dean was the only fatality."

Edmiston said the crash occurred before he was born, and he doesn't know who was at fault for the incident. But the spot has become one of many dangerous intersections in town.

Edmiston said part of the problem with the intersections with Highway 395

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— Jason Edmiston, Hermiston Police Chief

is the high volume of semi trucks traveling through town. A potential solution, he said, would be to alter the trucks' route.

"Several years ago, all the traffic in Redmond used to go through downtown. Then they built a bypass. In a perfect world, we'd have a bypass. Obviously, resources don't allow for that, but we would fully support it."

Another idea that's been brought to the city is to prohibit semi trucks from turning right onto Highway 207 from 395, and instead have them go all the way to Highway 730.

"That's not a city decision. It's a state decision," he said, adding that it would be difficult to enforce.

Edmiston said the investigation for the most recent crash, in early April, is ongoing, but once it's over his department will be able to meet with ODOT to discuss some potential changes.

Strandberg said ODOT's system allows them to review those problem spots to try and determine a few things.

"Is there a construction component that could alleviate some concerns? Is there

an education component? We look at traffic speed patterns and do studies. What is the problem, and can the problem be fixed?" he said.

Umatilla County Sheriff's Sgt. Josh Roberts said the bulk of crashes in their jurisdiction usually take place in the Hermiston area.

"You see a lot at 395 and Feedville," he said. "You're crossing four lanes of traffic in front of a truck."

That problem also occurs at Highway 11 in Milton-Freewater, another location where the department sees an uptick in fatal crashes.

Roberts said he doesn't know the specific reasons for the higher crash rates in those areas, but guesses it has to do with cars having to cross more lanes of traffic.

Certain problem areas have also caught the attention of citizens.

Erinn Breece, a Portland resident, recently started a petition to get a divider and some improved lighting on Westland Road, after her brother and two of his friends were in an accident on the road a few weeks ago. The car, carrying three people, swerved out of the way to avoid a drunk driver,

and ended up in a ditch. Her brother had multiple cuts on his face, a dislocated hand and hip. He was flown to Kadlec Hospital in Richland, and his friends were treated for a concussion and major cuts and bruises at Good Shepherd Hospital in Hermiston.

"I was one of the first cars up there when I got the call," Breece wrote on her petition. "The roads were so dark, I couldn't even see the bright red Ford sedan they were in. We need to prevent more lives from being injured or killed."

Breece is in the process of collecting signatures, and plans to send the petition to Umatilla County officials in the hopes of getting some changes made to the road.

Westland Road has been a problem in the past. In July 2013, a woman driving a Nissan Altima died when her car hit a semi truck head-on, causing both the car and truck to catch fire. The driver of the semi truck suffered minor injuries.

Strandberg noted that while a high percentage of crashes are caused at least in part by driver error, ODOT is constantly looking for ways to improve safety.

"We want to know if there are areas of high incident rates, and what we can do about them," he said.

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In this Feb. 2017 file photo, then-National Security Adviser Michael Flynn sits in the East Room of the White House in Washington.

Pentagon joins probe of former Trump aide Flynn

WASHINGTON (AP) — Investigations intensified into President Donald Trump's ousted national security adviser, Michael Flynn, on Thursday as the Pentagon watchdog joined lawmakers in probing payments he accepted from foreign sources including a Russian state-sponsored TV network.

At the same time, documents released by the top Democrat on a House oversight committee showed Flynn was warned by authorities after he retired from the military in 2014 not to take foreign government-sourced money without "advance approval" from the Pentagon.

Flynn, a former Army lieutenant general and Defense Intelligence Agency chief, later accepted tens of thousands of dollars for his work on behalf of foreign interests, including RT, the state-supported Russian television network, and a Turkish-owned company linked to Turkey's government.

The Pentagon's acting inspector general's office confirmed Thursday he has launched an inquiry into whether those payments qualify as coming from foreign governments and whether Flynn properly informed military authorities about them.

The White House defended its hiring of Flynn and attempted to shift blame for any problems with his vetting onto the Obama administration, which

handled the reissuance of his security clearance in January 2016.

Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., who released the documents, said during a news conference that Flynn had been clearly informed he needed to get permission to receive foreign payments and there's no evidence he did so.

"The Pentagon's warning to General Flynn was bold, italicized and could not have been clearer," Cummings said.

In a key 2014 document, Flynn was told by a Defense Intelligence Agency official that the U.S. Constitution's emoluments provision prohibits any monetary payments or gifts "from a foreign government unless congressional consent is first obtained."

The Oct. 8, 2014, letter — which was sent to Flynn at his request — explained that such "advance approval" would need to come "from the relevant service secretary."

Earlier this week, Cummings and Republican Rep. Jason Chaffetz, chairman of the House committee, said that they had found no evidence Flynn asked the Army for permission to receive foreign payments or informed the military he had accepted them. Army spokeswoman Cynthia O. Smith said the Army had no records that Flynn requested that permission.

DEBT: State owned \$3.3 billion in unpaid fees, taxes

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renewing state contracts, and to report outstanding debt and the amount they think is collectible to the state's chief operating officer by June 1.

The order also asks the Department of Revenue to "evaluate" making a transparency website that lists "legally appropriate information about (the state's) debtors." The state's open data portal, using datasets from the state revenue department, already publishes a list of the top 50 delinquent debtors in both personal income and business taxes.

"I think it's critically important that we be more aggressive and more comprehensive in our approach to debt collection," Brown said in response to questions from reporters Thursday.

Asked about the possible expense of her debt collection proposal, Brown said the state gets "big bang for our buck" when hiring additional full-time equivalent employees at the Department of Revenue. Noting the state's hiring freeze, she said that "what's key about this is the comprehensive, coordinated and aggressive nature that we're undertaking to collect those dollars owed to the state."

The details of Brown's plan won't be available until she signs the order next week, so it's unclear how they will differ from the state's current collection efforts.

It's also unclear how much of the

outstanding debt can be collected.

The amount of money owed to the state is constantly in flux, and there is a finite amount that is actually collectible, according to Bob Estabrook, a spokesman for the Department of Revenue.

"Unfortunately, not all debt is created equal," Estabrook said.

For example, income tax debt usually indicates that at one point the debtor was making money, Estabrook said. Court-ordered fines and judgments, on the other hand, can occur regardless of the debtor's financial circumstance or job status.

While DOR has ways to collect debt, sometimes the agency lacks enough information to find people with outstanding debt, and sometimes the people who owe money don't have the means to pay.

"We have kind of a standard set of tools we use," Estabrook said, "...And once you've gone through the standard steps, you can get to a place where (debtors) don't have assets we can pursue, or we don't have the information to pursue that debtor."

It is tough to say whether hiring more people at the department, as a bill before the Legislature proposes, would greatly decrease the amount of money owed to the state.

Senate Bill 89 is an effort to centralize collections at the Department of Revenue, a move that could

cost the state about \$2.4 million in additional personnel costs. The bill would require certain state agencies using private collection agencies for specific debts after 90 days to use the collections services of the Department of Revenue instead.

An analysis from the nonpartisan Legislative Revenue Office says the proposed measure has "indeterminate" effects on the state's revenue because it depends on an unknown: whether the Department of Revenue is more effective at collecting debt than private collectors.

"Data are not available on the relative efficacy of collections efforts and the population owing debts to various agencies can vary greatly," the analysis states. If the Department of Revenue is more effective at collecting debt than a private entity, then revenues could increase; but if they're not, revenues could actually decrease.

State Rep. David Gomberg, D-Central Coast, who has advocated for improving state debt collection, said he believes there are several things the state can get better at.

Among them, he thinks that the state should keep track of state contractors who have outstanding debt, a measure the governor's executive order plans to call for. The state hasn't tracked contractors who owe the state money because of "antiquated computer systems that can't talk to each other," Gomberg said.

GROW: Neighbor has questions

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money invested in this."

Ramirez also said she and the GhostTown team are buying the building next week from Echo farmer Kent Madison, and they can start up operations once they have the commission's OK.

Commissioner Maureen McCormach then asked if anyone wanted to speak in opposition. Kami Walborn, office manager of DK Alignment, said she and DK owner Don Kindsfather were not for or against GhostTown, but had concerns and plenty of questions.

DK Alignment is at 2550 N.E. Riverside Place, behind GhostTown's new home, and handles semitrailer repairs. Walborn said the two businesses will share one road, and that could be an issue when big rigs come in for service. She also said the new cash-only business brings security concerns to the neighborhood, and she questioned what benefit Pendleton would get from having the grow.

GhostTown member Chris Strawn said the business is not going to have much traffic and no semis. Moving their product, he said, requires a "high-tech, unmarked security vehicle."

And security would be the top priority, he said, with 8-foot high fencing topped with barbed wire, a gate controlled from inside

the building and "security cameras all over the place."

Pendleton was not the first choice, he said, but this building has few doors and is out of the public eye, and they plan to keep it that way with "no signage whatsoever."

He added the hydroponics mean water use is low, LED lights mean lower electrical demands, and large charcoal filters will curtail odors.

GhostTown will pay a 3 percent tax to city, he said, which will be a "tremendous amount of money, though all in cash."

Ramirez has to buy a city business license, Strawn said, and this is going to be GhostTown Organix's first grow. At 51 years old he and been around grows for 25 years.

"If you're looking at spending a million dollars on something, you better know what you're doing," he said.

McCormach closed the hearing, and after some records keeping the commission was ready to vote. Commissioner Ryan DeGroff moved to approve, and Brian Currin gave the second. Commissioner Terry Clarke was the lone vote against.

Moments before, commissioner Sunny Harmeson commented on the landscaping at the site, which is rather plain.

"Kind of funny," she said. "Gonna have all the green inside."

CUTS: 78 percent of budget goes to personnel

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Michelle Jones, director of business services, said the district was on track to have a \$3 million shortfall based on a projected \$7.8 billion state education budget. With 78 percent of the district's funding tied to personnel costs, Jones said, the goal has become how to minimize the shortfall's impact.

"We did not take this decision lightly," she said. "We worked on it for months. It changed quite a bit as different information came to light."

Board chair Debbie McBee said the state budget was the main driver behind the shortfall and the layoffs.

"These decisions are not actions based on poor decisions in our district," she said. "They are not entirely related to declining enrollment. That is one of our issues, but that is not causing the full brunt of the situation. The real base issue is the insufficient funding by the state of Oregon for education. It impacts our district immensely when it's coupled with declining enrollment and other issues."

McBee added that district officials are

continuing to work on a strategic plan that would help solve some of the district's funding issues.

There's still time before the layoffs are made permanent. The budget committee, comprised of the school board and seven community members, will get their first look at the district's budget proposal May 18.

The district expects to adopt a budget June 12. If the Legislature increases the money going toward education before Pendleton adopts its budget, the board could amend the proposal to re-add the positions.

Bixler said those who are laid off will be able to apply for other open positions and will be treated as an internal candidate, guaranteeing them an interview.

Superintendent Andy Kovach did not attend the meeting. When asked about Kovach's absence, McBee said he was apprised of the situation but declined to provide a reason why he wasn't at the meeting.

The board's meeting room was noticeably fuller than usual, but no one from the audience signed up to speak during the public comment portion of the meeting.

DEPOSIT: Capped at 350 containers per trip

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return rate dropped from 70 percent in 2012 and 2013 to 68 percent in 2014, and 64 percent in 2015.

The Bottle Drop station in Hermiston opened in July 2016. Before that, people could deposit their bottles and cans at individual grocery stores.

Some at the Hermiston Bottle Drop were encouraged to start recycling beverage containers after the redemption rate increased.

"This is my first time here," said Susan Carlson, after depositing a cart full of bottles.

"It's actually pretty easy. Before, at the grocery store, it was cold and it would spit the cans out sometimes. But here, there's nice, friendly help. I definitely think I'll come back."

Carlson also signed up for an account at the Bottle Drop, in which customers receive two green bags and an account cart. They can fill and drop off up to two green bags filled with containers per day.

Others have been using bottle drop stations for years, but are now starting to see more returns.

"It's a pretty good deal," said Sobotta, who has been coming in since before the deposit increased. "I think I'll use it more."

Jules Bailey, chief stewardship officer and director of external relations for the Oregon Beverage Recycling Cooperative, said the state has overall seen double the returns they had before the deposit increased.

"That's true for Hermiston," he said. Bottle drop centers around the state are also expanding and hiring more people.

John Kasuba is new to the Hermiston area, but has been depositing bottles and cans for years in Gresham, where he used to live.

Kasuba said he likes that more people might recycle because of the increase, but isn't convinced it will benefit everyone. He said while people might deposit more in the hopes of getting some more money back, it won't make a real dent in people's incomes.

"People are still not making enough to rent an apartment in Multnomah County," he said. "That's why I'm out here. I don't think incomes are going to increase in correspondence with the increased bottle deposit."

Still, he said, the increase may encourage some to drop off bottles when they wouldn't have before.

"I met a lady over there, she was familiar with the stigma," Kasuba said. "Her friends wouldn't deposit them, they'd just throw them away. But now, with the higher deposit, she's going to collect bottles from all her friends. These centers are nicer, and it's easier to load, too. So maybe there is some good out of it."

The station also has several bins for recycling plastic bags, cans, glass and cardboard, and has five self-serve stations and a staffed customer service table. Starting Jan. 1, 2018, beverage containers for tea, coffee, hard cider, fruit juice, kombucha and coconut water will also be redeemable for a deposit.

The station is open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day, and there is an outside drop station as well. There are daily limits on how much an individual can deposit: Two green bags per person per day and 350 containers per person per day.

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