

SCHOOL: Attendance at 3,052 students on first day

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the community.

“You can’t lead what you don’t know,” Fritsch said.

Fritsch plans to make trips to the schools each week as a part of a regular routine.

District-wide issues

Declining enrollment is a trend on Fritsch’s radar.

According to Fritsch, approximately 3,052 students were in attendance at a Pendleton School District school on the first day.

While that figure is better than the district ended with on June 1, it’s lower than the 3,173 students who attended the first day of school last year.

Although the district expects student enrollment to rise in the coming weeks, it’s taking steps to try to address the problem.

Fritsch said he’s taking a look at the “cohort survival rate,” studying each grade level year by year and seeing how many students stay on or transfer elsewhere.

He also wants to start looking at families who live in Pendleton but never entered their kids into public schools in the first place.

In the meantime, the district will continue to develop an online school program to bring some district students back into the fold.

Fritsch said administration also wants to right-size classroom numbers. Fritsch would like to see class sizes in the low-20s rather than the 28-29 students some classes are experiencing.

New at schools

At the high school level, the district’s career technical education program has grown while also taking a hit.

Pendleton High School Principal Dan Greenough said robotics and culinary classes are now taught full-time at the Pendleton Technology and Trades Center instead of being split between the high school’s main campus and the former West Hills Intermediate School behind it.

Kristin Swaggart’s culinary program is being bolstered in other ways — including more classes at the center’s commercial kitchen.

In addition, thanks to a \$100,000 grant from Farmers Insurance, the culinary program’s food truck has been delivered and is road ready.

Outfitted with a smoker, fryer, oven and other pieces of equipment, Swaggart said the truck will be open to the public at the PHS football team’s home opener against La Grande High School on Friday.

Swaggart said students won’t serve food out of the truck until they get some learning under their belt and food handler licenses.

Despite the gains in the CTE program, it also lost its full-time coordinator.

When former CTE Coordinator Curt Thompson filled a vacancy left behind by former high school Assistant Principal Chris Bettineski, who now works as the InterMountain Online coordinator, the district left Thompson’s old position unfilled.

Fritsch said high school staff will handle CTE coordinating duties for now, but the district will look at reviving the position longterm with dropout prevention funds from Measure 98.

At Sunridge Middle School, Principal Dave Williams said his faculty are making a concerted push to build personal relationships with students.

Williams said that research shows that students with strong relationships with teachers perform better in school and attend more often.

He had his staff create a master list of ways to build bonds with students, which were then reduced to a handful of methods teachers could employ.

Williams said it could be as simple as seeing a student wearing a Ducks or Beavers shirt and striking up a conversation about it.

During her prep period, Sunridge sixth grade teacher Nichole Erwin told Fritsch and Williams that she originally planned to insert a slideshow or an additional activity to round out her day.

Instead, Erwin used her time to help kids with lockers or talk with students sitting by themselves during lunch.

“You sit down with a kid and 10 more kids will come,” she said.

Teachers are also changing up their routines at Washington Elementary School.

For the first time, Principal Aimee VanNice said students will be placed in cross-grade small groups.

Second and third graders or fourth and fifth graders will intermingle in small groups based on their skill level, ensuring students will have 30 minutes of reading and math at their skill level.

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DATA: Free enterprise zones create incentives to draw new businesses

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the deal, so the parties have not worked how much each would receive.

The agreement also calls for Vadata to pay the county an annual improvement payment of \$4 million for each year of the exemption period. Each data center beyond the fifth costs an additional \$750,000.

The county board voted 3-0 in favor of the deal Wednesday in Pendleton.

Chalmers, who is also a Pendleton city councilor, was on the county team that worked on the agreement, along with Commissioner George Murdock, chief financial officer Robert Pahl, and counselor Doug Olsen.

Murdock said in terms of maintaining the stability of

county programs, these deals are essential.

The county cannot raise property taxes, he said, so the only way to bring in enough revenue to cover county programs is to expand the tax base. Murdock and Chalmers said programs — like free enterprise zones — create incentives to draw businesses.

They also said the deal packs benefits for the local economy. Each dollar Vadata spends on development, Chalmers said, touches seven hands, from “heads on beds” in local hotels to hiring area subcontractors.

Olsen said once the city of Umatilla agrees to the deal, Business Oregon, the state’s economic development agency, has to give its OK. Olsen said in his experience,

the state approves these agreements.

In other county business, the board approved revising the county’s planning director position in the wake of long-serving director Tamra Mabbott taking a job with the city of Umatilla.

Murdock said Mabbott divided her time between land use planning and economic development. The board on Wednesday created one director position for land use planning and code enforcement and one coordinator of economic development and tourism.

The planning department has the equivalent of four full-time employees, he said, and rather than adding to that, the board reorganized the department.

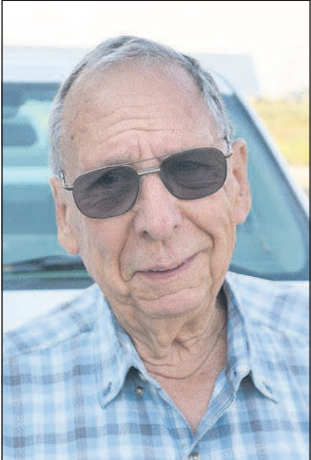
POTATOES: 65 percent of Oregon potatoes are exported

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a conveyor belt into the back of a 30-ton semi-truck bound for the farm’s packing plant in Sherwood.

In another three weeks, Amstad said they will be going full bore on filling their eight, 9,000-ton storage sheds around the county. Most of what Amstad grows are fresh market potatoes — the kind you find in the produce section of the grocery store — though the farm also plants several varieties of red and yellow potatoes, which are sold to Reser’s Fine Foods to make potato salad.

Not only is quality looking good this year for Columbia Basin potatoes, but so is price, according to Amstad. Thanks in large part to a 15,000-acre reduction in neighboring Idaho, Amstad said the fresh market is looking to bring in about \$12 per 100 pounds, which is the best he’s seen in three years.



Amstad

This year brought excellent growing weather during the months of April, May and June, Amstad said. He admits he was concerned as temperatures have climbed in recent weeks to triple digits, as such stifling heat can essentially halt the development of tubers. But with harvest beginning Aug. 5, he said yields are so far looking promising.

“Overall, when I look back on 58 years, it’s been very good to us.”

— Tony Amstad, owner of Amstad Farms

Brewer cautions it is still early, and said he wouldn’t be surprised if the intense heat does result in a slight dip in yields. Most growers are prepared for that, he said, and he doesn’t anticipate any quality issues related to the heat.

Meanwhile, Amstad’s crews will remain busy with harvest well into October. Barring anything unexpected, the crop should fetch a reasonable profit.

“It’s kind of a good feeling for a change,” Amstad said.

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GRADUATION: 14 percent of survey respondents favored Kennison Field

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for friends and family, and Wayland said there was a good chance that number would be reduced to four in 2018. The venue also presents safety and visibility issues with so many people packed inside the gym, and has limited accommodations for guests with disabilities.

On the positive side, the indoor gym does not require a backup location in case of inclement weather, the district has full control over the venue in the weeks leading up to the event, and the school is a source of community pride.

Wayland said the district spent about \$11,883 on graduation in 2017, including audio/visual rentals and upgrades, staff time for set-up, decorations, and an array of preparations the district completes each year before graduation, including new paint and window-washing.

Board member Mark Gomolski questioned whether the district really needed to spend so much money on things like new paint every year, especially if the gym would only be used in case of emergency, but Sherman, Principal Tom Spoo and Superintendent Tricia Mooney all said that Hermiston has a tradition of treating graduation as a very formal, serious event and they didn’t want to compromise on quality.

“This is a culminating event for our families,” Spoo said. “It’s very important. ... We expect this to be formal, and we try to show that we have class. It’s something parents will remember and we take pride in that.”

Kennison Field

Only 14 percent of the 859 survey respondents “very strongly agree” with using Kennison Field for graduation.

The venue would seat 2,400 including students, staff and the band, meaning attendance would still be limited, and the district would still do its usual preparations of the gym in case of inclement weather.

Wayland estimates using Kennison Field would cost

an average of \$25,878 per year. That includes the \$11,883 for preparing the gym, plywood to cover the field (Wayland averaged a per-year cost on the assumption the plywood could be used for five years), repairs to turf damaged during setup and cleanup, chair rentals and upgrades to the stadium on par with what the district does to prepare the gym.

“People’s expectations of attending a sporting event in the rain is a lot different than the graduation of their only child,” Wayland said.

He said the estimates for seating and cost did not include renting any additional bleachers.

EOTEC arena

The Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center had the most positive response from the community survey, with 46 percent of respondents saying they very strongly agreed with using the venue for graduation.

Wayland said the indoor event center would not accommodate any more seating than the high school gym, but the rodeo arena could seat 5,000 people, removing the need to give each student limited tickets for family members.

The downside of the arena is that Wayland estimated it would cost an average of \$34,678 per year to host graduation there, including the money to prepare the gym in case of bad weather. He said EOTEC doesn’t have a set price for renting its arena yet, but based on prices for the event center he guessed it would cost about \$2,500, plus the district would have to buy plywood to cover the dirt floor, rent audio/visual equipment and put money into getting the venue graduation-ready.

“The arena prep and cleanup is going to be significant because we’re going to have to spend a lot of time, a lot of manpower, to get the arena right,” he said.

Wayland said it would also be difficult to make graduation accessible for students with disabilities, and the plywood panels could shift in the dirt and create tripping hazards.

Toyota Center

The Toyota Center in Kennewick was the most polarizing of the four options presented to the community, with about 36 percent of respondents strongly agreeing with the choice, but 37 percent strongly disagreeing.

On the positive side, the Toyota Center would allow students to invite as many friends and family members as they want, and is the cheapest option because the center is used to holding multiple graduations per year and would require little work on the district’s part. Wayland said if the district signed a five-year contract it could expect to spend about \$6,550 per year, including transportation costs.

The downside, according to Wayland, was that moving graduation out of town would not inspire the same community pride as having it in Hermiston. The district would also need to provide transportation to parents and students without the means to drive themselves to the Tri-Cities, and would have to compete with other area schools for scheduling, which could mean a week-night ceremony.

At the end of the presentation, Sherman said she knew that whatever decision the board made, some would disagree, but she appreciated that at the beginning Wayland had named “what’s best for the students” as the top consideration.

“This was very helpful,” she said. “We don’t ask for this haphazardly; we want to use this information so we can make the best decision.”

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“It’s called supply and demand,” he said. “And demand has been real good so far.”

Bill Brewer, CEO of the Oregon Potato Commission, said the fresh market has been dogged by overproduction the last couple of years. When Idaho, the largest supplier nationwide, reduces production, Brewer said Oregon is well positioned to reap the benefits.

Oregon’s potato export markets have also been on the rise over the last 10 years, Brewer added, thanks to the prosperous french fry and potato chip industries overseas in countries like Mexico, China and throughout the Pacific Rim.

“Our international markets are extremely important to us,” Brewer said, noting that 65 percent of Oregon potatoes are exported.

Domestically, about half of Oregon potatoes are sent to french fry factories like the massive Lamb Weston plants in Hermiston and Boardman. Another 20 percent are used for potato flakes and flour, like what’s made at Oregon Potato Company in Boardman. Roughly 8-10 percent go to potato chip processors like Shearer’s Foods in Hermiston.

The rest are fresh market, which makes up the bulk of taters at Amstad Farms.

Tony Amstad started the business in 1959, making this his 58th potato harvest. He has seen plenty of cycles in the industry, and has learned to take the good with the bad.

“Overall, when I look back on 58 years, it’s been very good to us,” he said.

Amstad’s partners include his two sons, Jeff and Skeeter, and his nephew, Todd Dimbat. Amstad Farms is now one of the region’s larger growers of fresh market potatoes.

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