

Bus driver shortage ruffles routes

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

The Hermiston School District has received several complaints this school year about irregular bus timings for students, including early pickups and late dropoffs.

School district and Mid-Columbia Bus Company employees say the issues are largely due to a shortage of drivers and to adjustments of routes that often happen at the beginning of the school year.

The district contracts with Mid-Columbia Bus Company, which serves 49 total school districts and 19 in Eastern Oregon. The regional bus barn serves Hermiston, Umatilla and Stanfield.

Several parents have complained to the Hermiston School District in the past few weeks about their children being picked up too early or too late by their school buses.

Brad Wayland, Hermiston's director of operations, said the district is aware of complaints and has been working with MidCo to resolve issues.

"We have had issues raised. Most have primarily been late bus times," Wayland said. "We're working through the issues. We're making sure they get the info from our end, and I'm making sure they have student names and all the information they need."

Wayland said the district has 16 normal routes, as well as several special education routes. In the past few weeks, he said, the bus company has received help from drivers that usually work in other areas.

Wayland said for the 2016-2017 school year, MidCo received about \$1.5 million to contract with the Hermiston School District. However, he noted, not all of that money came directly from the Hermiston School District. More than half, he said, came from state funding and some from the Booster Club.

"Some transportation is for field trips, clubs, the football team," he said. "So there's some reimbursements from the club itself."

Wayland said the school district pays a small percentage of the funds for MidCo's contract, but he didn't know the exact number because it changes every year.

Cindy Nicholson, MidCo's Regional Director of Operations, said the



Mike Marcum, a bus driver with MidCo, returns from a route.



Buses parked in the Mid-Columbia Bus Company lot.

company is aware of complaints, whether they come directly to the MidCo office or are relayed from school districts with whom they contract.

She said the main problem they've faced this year has been a driver shortage.

But she said they are actively recruiting drivers, and have tabled at a recent job fair, as well as handing out several hundred flyers.

"Since school started, we tested three (potential drivers) last weekend, and we're testing three this weekend," she said. She added that once someone gets hired, it takes about four weeks of training and certification before they can start driving a route.

They also recently began a new recruitment tactic, offering grants to school districts that refer drivers to MidCo. Once the person has been hired and has worked for MidCo for 60 days, the company will donate \$300 to the district to be used for a school-related activity. So far, the company has made two referral-based donations

to the Umatilla School District.

Nicholson said the key to managing all the day-to-day changes that happen with routes is staying in constant communication with the school districts.

"Brad (Wayland) is very good at communicating with us if something happens, and how we address it," she said. She said the company is also experimenting with apps that would allow parents to track where their student's bus is.

If a child is missing or got on the wrong bus, she said, all buses have to stop and be in communication with each other and the school via radio until they find out where that child is. Sometimes, she said, communication between the schools and buses gets muddled.

Recently, parents complained that their students were asked to leave school early to get on the bus. Nicholson said that incident was due to a misunderstanding, where a bus driver went to pick up her own children, and the

teacher misunderstood and released other children from the class as well.

The local bus barn currently has 41 drivers.

"We'd love to have 10 more," Nicholson said. Drivers sometimes have to double routes, especially when they have to drive to after-school activities. The company transports about 3,000 students in the Hermiston, Stanfield and Umatilla area.

"We always get a few that register a little late. If you add one person in, it throws off the whole route," Nicholson said. "You think you have it right, and then another kid comes and you have to redo the schedule."

Entire routes can also get off-schedule if a school gets out late.

"Drivers have to go straight from the elementary school to the high school," she said. "If the elementary school is a bit off, it throws the high school off."

Part of the challenge with retaining drivers, she said, is that it's a part-time job. Many who seek out the work eventually leave when they find a full-time position.

Nicholson said the company has been dealing with the shortage by pulling in drivers from other locations. She said the company is also trying to become more accessible to the public if they have concerns.

"We've added a couple of different phone lines, and we hired another full-time office staff this year," she said.

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Rock blast at Port of Umatilla clears way for road

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

An explosion at the Port of Umatilla on Thursday night is helping pave the way for a new \$3.5 million road connecting the port with industrial land owned by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Apollo Inc., a general contractor based in Kennewick, planted charges deep inside a basalt cliff face near Launch Lane Thursday for a carefully controlled blast that created a mountain of

More online

For video of the blast visit www.eastoregonian.com

new gravel to be used during construction of the paved road this fall. The port is also donating sand to the project.

In 2013 the legislature appropriated \$3.5 million to the CTUIR "for the purpose of acquiring, developing and constructing a 1.5 mile road extension connecting the Port of Umatilla to certain industrial lands."

Those lands are 195 acres, located about a mile east of

Two Rivers Correctional Institution. The road will extend from Beach Access Road past the Department of Corrections property to the edge of the CTUIR's acreage.

The tribes are also partnering with the city of Umatilla on a project to extend city water and sewer services to the site. The city will take ownership of the road and other infrastructure once construction is complete. The upgrades will make the property more marketable for economic development.

On Thursday water trucks from Apollo Inc. wet the cliff face and surrounding gravel to help reduce the amount of billowing dust after the explosion. The spectacle drew a few onlookers, including port manager Kim Puzey, a truck from Umatilla Rural Fire Protection District, Jason Middleton of United Grain Corporation and a herd of about 10 deer. Middleton's son Rian got the honor of pressing the button to set off the charges.

Stanfield City Council to mull updates to nuisance ordinances, mobile food vendors

East Oregonian

Stanfield City Council will discuss updates to its nuisance ordinances Tuesday.

The city has been working to make its language on odor nuisances more precise after fielding months of complaints about bad smells

from a dehydration plant run by 3D Idapro Solutions at 405 N. Hooser Lane. During its Sept. 5 meeting the council said they favored rules drafted by city staff based on the city of Hermiston's ordinance, but wanted to update noise ordinances at the same time and get the city's legal counsel to sign

off on it first.

The code amendments are on the agenda for Tuesday's council meeting, along with a discussion about possibly creating regulations for mobile food vendors.

The council will meet at 7 p.m. Tuesday in city council chambers, 150 W. Coe Ave.

PENDLETON

Council could ban tobacco use in parks

New REACH lease, ODOT partnership also on the table

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

By the end of the Pendleton City Council meeting Tuesday, the city could ban tobacco use in all city parks, take another incremental step toward realigning the Interstate 84 Exit 209 interchange and find a new home for a controversial nonprofit.

Mariah Hinds, the Umatilla County Health Department tobacco prevention coordinator, will give a presentation to the council that has already won the support of the Pendleton Parks and Recreation Commission.

The council approved an administrative rule in 2013 banning smoking within 25 feet of a park playground, but it that did not apply to the entirety of parks and carried no penalties.

Police Chief Stuart Roberts said in an interview Thursday he would have some concerns if the new tobacco ban lacks enforceable penalties.

If a person reported someone smoking in the park but the cigarette was already out by the time police arrive and no one claims responsibility for smoking, the caller could get frustrated when no citation is issued.

Additionally, Roberts said the police department does have the resources to consistently patrol parks for smoking activity.

Roberts said enforcement needs to be considered when approving these types of laws.

"We make new laws, but we don't really take them off the books," he said.

After operating out of the Pendleton Recreation Center for several months, REACH Pendleton, a youth outreach nonprofit, is asking the council for a long-term lease.

But REACH is no longer seeking use of the rec center and is now requesting to rent the old Pendleton police station at 109 S.W. Court Ave.

In its short history, REACH has drawn concern from community members and city officials for displacing existing programs at the rec center, the depth of its involvement with local churches and inaccurate crime statistics it reported on its website.

REACH board member Joe Jackson acknowledged community concern in an Aug. 29 letter to the city council explaining the organization's decision to find a new site.

"The proposed use and/or lease of the Rec Center building by REACH brought about a considerable amount of community worry and concern, and though much of the voiced concerns were not founded on what had actually been proposed, it has become very clear that the community would prefer to keep the present use of the Rec Center and not offer the facility for lease," he wrote.

In exchange for use of the old police station, REACH is proposing to rent the building for \$1 per month on a one-year lease, in addition to providing tenant and liability insurance on the facility.

Additionally, REACH wants an option to extend the lease to a second year after the first is over, and to buy the building outright after the lease is over.

The council will discuss a proposed cost-share agreement between the city and the Oregon Department of Transportation.

If the council approves the agreement, the city and ODOT could team up to apply for a grant to cover the costs of Phase 1 planning and engineering work to realign I-84 exit 209.

Current plans call for the four-way intersection of Southwest Emigrant Avenue and Southwest 20th Street near Exit 209 on Interstate 84 to be moved west, where some homes and retail spaces are now.

Instituting such a change would require realigning 20th Street and building a new road to access the Southgate entrance and exit, among other changes. The city believes these changes will alleviate traffic.

Under the proposed agreement, the city would pay \$300,000, ODOT would kick in \$71,890 and the federal government would cover the rest of the \$1 million to undertake the engineering process.

"Without federal assistance, (Pendleton) simply does not have the financial resources at this time to fund further project related costs without incrementally borrowing funds and taking away local resources for ongoing pavement preservation," City Manager Robb Corbett and Public Works Director Bob Patterson wrote in a report to the council.

The city's current estimates for the project's total cost range from \$22.5 million to \$31.9 million.

The council will meet at 7 p.m. at the council chambers in city hall, 500 S.W. Dorion Ave.

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

SUBMIT COMMUNITY NEWS

Submit information to: community@eastoregonian.com or drop off to the attention of Tammy Malgesini at 333 E. Main St., Hermiston or Renee Struthers at 211 S.E. Byers Ave., Pendleton. Call 541-564-4539 or 541-966-0818 with questions.

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