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ODOT bracing for winter with new plows, salt

La Niña could mean wetter, colder weather

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
East Oregonian

Snow flurries are already starting to fly in northeast Oregon, foreshadowing what could be another unusually cold and wet winter for the region.

Forecasters say it is still too early to tell if this year's winter will be as severe as last, when icy conditions forced highways to close for days at a time. The Oregon Department of Transportation, however, is preparing for the worst after purchasing five new tow plows — capable of plowing two lanes at once — and expanding its pilot program to use rock salt on more local highways.

Shelley Snow, ODOT spokeswoman, said the plows will be placed strategically along Interstate 84 through Eastern Oregon, including at Pendleton, Meacham, La Grande, Baker City and Ontario. The department is also building three new salt sheds along I-84 at Mission, Echo and Boardman, which should be completed before the end of the year. Each shed is capable of storing up to 1,000 tons of salt.

"Based on what we've seen on the interstates the last couple of years, this could be a really good thing," Snow said. "I think statewide, there's a trend where we're seeing (winter) events that are potentially more catastrophic."

According to ODOT, one person was killed and 92 were injured in 58 crashes on local highways just in December 2016.

The issue caught the attention of the Oregon Legislature this year, which included a provision in the latest transportation package requiring the Oregon Transportation Commission develop a winter maintenance strategy that includes the use of rock salt.

ODOT initially launched its salt pilot project in 2013, along Highway 95 in southeast Oregon between the Nevada and Idaho borders and along Siskiyou Pass at the Oregon-California border. The program has yielded positive results, Snow said, and this year

See ODOT/12A

PENDLETON



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

The Vert Auditorium is currently home to the Oregon East Symphony, but was only used 24 days all of last year.

THE VACANT VERT

Complex has low occupation rate, \$1.6 million in deferred maintenance

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

The Vert Auditorium hosts symphony concerts, ballroom dancing and the occasional wedding and a funeral.

It also sits empty for most of the year.

The 800-seat auditorium is a part of the Vert Complex, an 80-year-old building in Pendleton that also houses a club room and second, smaller theater.

The building has more than \$1.6 million in deferred maintenance and City Manager Robb Corbett said the Vert is in need of marketing and promotion. But with the city's budget stretched among its many other infrastructure needs, major changes are not imminent.

"A Century of News and People in the East Oregonian: 1875-1975" was unsparing in its assessment of the man who funded the Vert's construction.

"(John) Vert was one who did



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Andrew Picken, president of the Rivoli Restoration Coalition board, and Jason Terry, of Kirby Nagelhout Construction, man the scissors at Friday's ribbon cutting in front of the Rivoli.

little for his community during his life but who enriched it at his death," author Gordon MacNab wrote. "His biggest role in the news before 1927, in nearly a half-century in Umatilla County,

was the time he threw an egg at a minister who was advocating for prohibition."

After his wife Mary died in 1927, Vert decided to use some of his considerable fortune to erecting

"This ol' girl needs some help."

— Glenn Graham,
Vert Complex facilities manager

a memorial to her. Mary was an educator, community organizer and prominent socialite.

Upon his own death in 1934, Vert bequeathed \$76,400 to the city to build the memorial. With the help of the Pendleton school system and a federal grant, the Vert Memorial Community Building was dedicated in 1937.

Today, the Vert is co-managed by Pendleton Parks and Recreation and the city's facility department. It is still in operation, although business is slow.

According to city calendars, the Vert Auditorium was booked for 30 days in 2015. Subtracting the days the Vert is closed for holidays, that's equivalent to an 8 percent occupation rate. 2016

See VERT/12A



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Umatilla County commissioners Bill Elfering, George Murdock and Larry Givens listen to Morrow County Public Health Director Sharee Smith talk about the county's health concerns during a joint meeting of the Umatilla County and Morrow County commissioners Friday in Heppner.

Umatilla, Morrow counties firm up alliance on key issues

Talk touched on health, housing, job training, taxes, water and wolves

By **PHIL WRIGHT**
East Oregonian

The boards of commissioners for Umatilla and Morrow counties had not sat down together for more than a decade. During their meeting Friday morning in Heppner, the two boards agreed that they have faced similar challenges in the intervening years.

Commissioners Melissa Lindsay, Don Russell and Jim Doherty of Morrow County hosted their Umatilla County counter-

parts, Larry Givens, Bill Elfering and George Murdock, at the Bartholomew Building, Morrow County's new administrative home. Several Morrow County department heads also attended, as did Umatilla County counsel Doug Olsen. The chit chat lasted a moment before the two boards dug into several topics that affect both counties, starting with workforce and housing.

More than 1,000 people will move into Umatilla County to work during the next three years, Elfering said, including 600 in data centers for careers that pay \$62,000 a year. With that kind of income they can afford a house, he

See COUNTIES/12A



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