

ROADS: Salt shed in Echo under construction

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relayed Murphy, adding that thus far there have been no significant closures of I-84 due to winter conditions.

ODOT has been building several salt sheds in the region, each of which can store up to 1,000 tons of salt.

The salt shed at Exit 193 in Echo is still being constructed. Murphy said ODOT has been using salt from the La Grande salt shed for use on the Pendleton side of Deadman Pass. He said ODOT estimates they have used between 700 and 1,000 tons of salt in the region so far, but that includes everywhere from the Idaho border to Meacham. And because this is the first year using rock salt on roads in the region, he said it's difficult to know what that number means.

Murphy said with magnesium chloride, another substance ODOT



Photo courtesy Jonathan Kerwin

A blanket of snow can't keep Pendleton's Main Street from bustling on Tuesday.

uses to combat icy roads, crews would try to limit its use to hills, curves and other trouble spots. Crews would also try to lay it down before snow or ice arrived.

Salt works a little differently, Murphy said. It's best to lay it down at the first hint of snow or ice.

"You have to time it so you put it down just as the

storm starts and then let it do its job," Murphy said.

Murphy said thus far, Umatilla County hadn't seen many bad accidents due to the weather.

"There's lots of slide-offs, dings and bangs," he said.

He said he didn't know whether that could be attributed to the use of rock salt, but he urged drivers to

"Most crashes involve driver behavior. We want people to understand they can do something — leaving early is something we can control."

— Peter Murphy, a spokesman for ODOT

continue taking whatever precautions they could.

"Most crashes involve driver behavior," he said. "We want people to understand they can do something — leaving early is something we can control."

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WINE: The Rocks District currently has 37 vineyards

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difference, those markers are telling you there's something special about that place on planet Earth," Robertson said. "That's a really remarkable thing. It's limited. It's rare. It's distinctive."

Terrific terroir

Robertson said there is evidence of wine grapes being grown in the area as far back as the early 1900s. The unique geography, he explained, makes for premier growing conditions.

The Rocks District is a subset of the Walla Walla AVA, though it is located entirely in Oregon. It is the only AVA predicated on one single soil series, characterized by basalt cobbles — and lots of them.

The land was essentially formed over thousands of years by the nearby Walla Walla River, which washed down from the Blue Mountains and deposited gravels up to several hundred feet deep.

Geologists call it an alluvial fan. Robertson calls it tremendous terroir. Not only do the rocks allow for incredible drainage, he said, but the surface stones also act as miniature radiators to ripen grapes later in the season.

"It's not because we're geniuses. It's because of that terroir," Robertson said.

The Rocks District covers 5.9 square miles and has grown to include 37 vineyards, with more in development. Robertson said a producer from Rioja, a wine region in northern Spain, has purchased 10 acres in the district, while Willamette Valley Vineyards, one of Oregon's top wine producers, will plant its first 5 acres in the district in early 2018.

Willamette Valley Vineyards, based south of Salem, is not new to the Walla Walla Valley. The company first purchased 42 acres in SeVein Vineyards near Milton-Freewater in 2015, growing mostly Cabernet Sauvignon.

Christine Clair, winery director for Willamette Valley Vineyards, said they purchased 36 acres of former apple and cherry orchards in



EO file photo

Vitner Steve Robertson of College Place points to one of the buds on a Syrah vine at his vineyard in the Rocks District, outside of Milton-Freewater, in this February 2015 file photo.



Photo contributed by Kevin Pogue

Rocky soil and large cobbles are a hallmark of The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater.

The Rocks District, which will eventually become an estate vineyard for their local brand.

"We think this is one of the most interesting wine growing areas in all the new world," Clair said.

Tail winds

The goal of The Rocks District Winegrowers, Robertson said, is to continue telling the district's story as the AVA garners more attention and investment from around the world.

The nonprofit currently represents 20 different growers. Robertson said another 165 acres are in development. In 10 years, he said, The Rocks District could become a major player at the global level.

"The hardest thing about

the wine industry is being patient," Robertson said. "I think our first steps can't necessarily be in New York or San Francisco. Our first steps need to be in Seattle and Portland."

Robertson said the nonprofit will be meeting in mid-February to decide upon its members' ambitions and marketing goals. First, he said, they need to build up their volume. Consumer awareness will then follow.

"Our biggest job in the Northwest is going to be Portland," Robertson said. "But the upside is strong, because so few people from Portland have had the opportunity to taste these wines."

Tom Danowski, presi-

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— Steve Robertson, owner of SJR Vineyard and Delmas Winery

dent of the Oregon Wine Board, already likes what he sees out of The Rocks District. The AVA, he said, is like a "turbo-charger" for highlighting the Oregon side of the Walla Walla Valley.

Along with critical acclaim and a passionate group of advocates, Danowski said those are the tail winds that can help an AVA take off fast.

"The potential is just going to be extraordinary," Danowski said.

Robertson said The Rocks District must prove it can walk before it runs, but ultimately he believes it will become the most important AVA in the Northwest.

"It's going to be an exponential rise in planted acres, which then drives everything else," Robertson said. "It's not a causal thing. It's serious business."

KRAWCZYK: Looking forward to new outdoor recreation

Continued from 1A

Mark said.

Mark — previously assistant finance director for the city of Fort Worth, Texas — started his job as Hermiston's finance director on Dec. 11. Tammy left behind a job as an educator and administrator at a small community college and said she hopes to be able to continue to work in higher education here.

They're a little apprehensive about what a northern winter might be like, but they are also looking forward to the new opportunities for hiking, biking, hunting, boating and other outdoor recreation now within a short drive.

"I want to learn how to snowboard," Mark said.

For now, however, he

is still settling in to the new job, and the couple is looking for a home in Hermiston's tight housing market.

Mark's previous experience includes banking, municipal finance, finance for a utility company, and time handling personal finances for millionaires in the oil industry in Texas. They had sold a company for \$2.3 billion and were looking to build "generational wealth."

He said each type of financial challenge taught him new lessons, from dealing with government regulations to handling problems that arose when people didn't heed his fiduciary advice. Mark likened jobs he has held to his time going on camping trips as an Eagle Scout and trying

to follow the principle of leaving the campsite better than when he found it.

"I have tried to do that with every job I've had and I hope to do that here," he said.

He said he is also on the faculty for the Graduate School of Banking at Louisiana State University, which offers a two-week course each spring, and loves the "light-bulb moments" when he helps small-town bank owners understand ways they can successfully compete with the country's largest banks for local customers.

Tammy said she is looking forward to finding a new job in the area. She said the couple has always been in the habit of involving themselves in the communities where they have lived.

She is enjoying Hermiston so far, and said everything from the investment in schools to the cleanliness of the roads shows that residents take pride in their community. She also appreciates the town's offerings of restaurants and businesses.

"I like the mom and pop shops, the drug store on Main," she said.

The Krawczyk name (pronounced "Crossick") is a little hard to spell, but Mark said it's as common as "Smith" in Polish. His father emigrated from Poland to America as a baby, but Mark said he doesn't remember much from the informal Polish lessons his father used to give him as a child.

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MEDICAID: Oregon's Medicaid program costs \$9.3B in funds per year

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coverage program for the poor and other qualifying groups. Oregonians earning up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level (\$16,100 for an individual; \$32,900 for a family of four) are eligible for the program. In Oregon, the Medicaid program is known as the Oregon Health Plan and covers about 1 million people, including 400,000 kids.

How is the Oregon Health Plan financed?

Both the state and the federal government pay for it with public funds, but the federal government picks up most of the tab. Plus, hospitals, insurers and coordinated care organizations all pay taxes — described in the measure as "assessments" — to the state. Oregon uses that money to get matching funding from the federal government.

How much do hospitals pay? Hospitals pay a 5.3 percent assessment on net revenues, which, once matched by the feds, is returned to them as a group and redistributed. Under the state law passed earlier this year, they also pay a .7 percent assessment on net revenues that is not returned to them, but put into a state fund for healthcare.

What does a "yes" vote mean? A "yes" vote means you want the state to impose and keep the nonrefundable .7 percent assessment on hospitals, as well as assessments on insurers, the Public Employees Benefits Board and coordinated care organizations — regional networks of OHP providers.

What does a "no" vote mean? A "no" vote means you wish to repeal the nonrefundable .7 percent assessment, and the assessments on insurers, the Public Employees Benefits Board and coordinated care organizations.

How does this ballot measure affect people on the Oregon Health Plan? Hundreds of thousands of Oregonians gained Medicaid coverage under the Affordable Care Act, which allowed states to provide coverage to people making up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level. As of November 2016, about 366,000 people were eligible for OHP under the Affordable Care Act.

Previously only those making up to 100 percent of the federal poverty level were considered eligible. But that group, earning between 100 percent and 138 percent of the federal poverty level, isn't legally required by the federal government to be covered by states.

Supporters of Measure 101 say that if it fails, the Legislature could decide to cut those people from the health plan to save the money that the state government won't be able to collect.

If the measure fails, would lawmakers have to cut the health plan budget?

No, but proponents note that faced with funding gaps in the past, lawmakers have knocked people off the Oregon Health Plan. "If you are a Medicaid recipient, this is about whether you have access to your health care," said Jessica Adamson, a lobbyist for Providence Health & Services, which is backing Measure 101. "This is about whether or not the funding is there to fully fund this program. Anything else besides Measure 101 is a gamble. There is no Plan B."

Opponents counter that state legislators can find that money elsewhere in the budget to cover those people. "This ballot measure isn't about whether Medicaid is good or bad," said Parrish, the lawmaker urging a "no" vote. "It's about whether we picked the right funding mechanism to pay for it."

I buy my own insurance. Does this affect how much I pay? Yes. Under the law, insurers will be assessed at 1.5 percent of gross premiums earned. Premiums on the individual market could increase by 1.5 percent because the legislation allows insurers to increase premiums by up

to that amount to offset the tax that they'll be paying, opponents say.

So if the tax fails, my rates won't go up? Not necessarily. Supporters of Measure 101 say that expanded Medicaid coverage reduces demands on costly emergency care. It also funds a program called reinsurance that is designed to hold down rate increases in premiums for people who buy their own insurance.

It essentially acts as insurance for insurers, providing a pool of money to reimburse insurers part of the cost of very expensive procedures. In 2018, the program is holding rates in Oregon's individual health insurance market, on average, 6 percent lower than they would be without reinsurance, according to the Department of Consumer and Business Services. That's about \$300 less per year, according to the "Yes on 101" campaign.

I get insurance through my employer. Does this affect how much I'll pay?

If you work for a business with 50 employees or fewer, neither outcome of the measure likely will affect your rates in 2018, but likely would in 2019.

Since 2018 rates have already been approved by the Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services, the Legislature would have to take action to change those rates.

Insurers in the small group market would pay the 1.5 percent tax on gross premiums earned.

What about big employers? For Oregonians who are covered through an employer with more than 50 employees, insurance costs will likely not immediately change due to either outcome of the measure, either. The state doesn't regulate rates for large employers.

Some large employers go out and buy plans from insurers. The state doesn't regulate rates for those types of plans, but it does regulate benefits, the way policy contracts are written and the financial solvency of companies offering plans. Those insurers who provide plans in the large group market will pay the 1.5 percent assessment as well if Measure 101 passes.

My company is self-insured. What can I expect? Some companies — usually bigger ones — self-insure and get plans through what's called a third party administrator. About 790,000 Oregonians are enrolled in a plan through a self-insured employer, according to the Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services.

The state doesn't regulate any part of those plans due to federal law. Self-insured employers are exempt from paying the state tax on the premiums specified on the ballot.

How much does all of this cost? Oregon's Medicaid program costs \$9.3 billion in state and federal funds per year, according to the Oregon Secretary of State's office.

If the measure is overturned, legislators would face an \$840 million to \$1.3 billion hole in the Medicaid budget, a figure that includes both state and federal matching funds.

How does this election affect people on Medicare?

Measure 101 will not have an effect on Medicare coverage. Medicare, the healthcare coverage program for people age 65 and older, is funded solely by the federal government and would not be affected by changes in state policy.

What about Tricare? Tricare, the health insurance program for military members, will not be affected by the insurance tax.

Will the outcome of the vote settle this issue? No. If Ballot Measure 101 fails in January, legislators will have to re-balance the budget during the February special session. But even if the measure passes, the provisions expire, meaning lawmakers would be debating this again in 2019.