

Bill could allow ODOT to reduce regional speed limits

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

As a legislator, state Sen. Cliff Bentz has been a vocal champion of raising speed limits in Eastern Oregon. But for the 2019 session, the Ontario Republican has introduced Senate Bill 397, which allows the Oregon Department of Transportation to lower speed limits on Eastern Oregon highways under certain circumstances without action from the legislature. Although Bentz is still happy that he supported the 2015 bill that raised speed limits on 10 segments of Eastern Oregon highways, he said there are some areas of highway that need to be adjusted. The bill came at the request of Malheur County Judge Dan Joyce. And Betnz said there are some specific areas of concern in Malheur County, which contains five highways where the speed limit was raised. When the speed limit increase went into effect in 2016, Highway 20 jumped from 55 miles per hour to 65 miles per hour from Ontario to Bend. Bentz said the stretch of road from Ontario to Vale isn't suitable for 65 miles per hour because of the surrounding population and propensity for farm equipment traffic. Bentz said Joyce was also concerned about Highway 95, which jumped to 70 miles per hour for vehicles and 65 for trucks. The highway spans the southern portion of Malheur County from the Idaho to Nevada borders. Under Bentz's new bill, ODOT could lower the speed limit on a segment of highway without a traffic or engineering study in Eastern Oregon counties with populations lower than 40,000 people if they receive word from local authorities that it's a danger to public safety. Back in 2015 when Bentz was still in the Oregon House of Representatives, he introduced a bill that focused on raising the speed limits on state highways. At the time, Bentz argued that raising speed limits would bring the state closer together through shorter travel times and not doing it would discriminate against rural Oregonians. When state Rep. Greg Barreto, R-Cove, introduced a similar bill that included Interstate 84, Bentz decided

to consolidate his bill with Barreto's. Barreto's bill passed through the legislature with bipartisan support and Gov. Kate Brown signed it into law. The legislature expanded it further during a short session before the law went into effect in March 2016. Since that time, an *East Oregonian* analysis found that deaths have trended upward on the roads where the speed limit was raised. And a recent study from ODOT and Portland State University found that fatal and serious injury crashes went up by 36 percent on highways raised to 70 miles per hour and rose 67 percent on roads that were increased to 65 miles per hour. According to ODOT data and Oregon State Police press releases, Malheur County has had 10 fatal crashes since March 2016, six of which were on roads where the speed limits were raised. The final figure is subject to change since OSP doesn't report every fatal crash and ODOT's most recent crash data is from 2016. Bentz thinks there could be more speed enforcement, but he's still satisfied with the overall speed limit raise. When he was appointed to the Oregon Senate in 2018, his constituency was expanded to include Wasco County, and he likes that he's able to drive more quickly between Ontario and The Dalles thanks to the limit increase. Additionally, the increase is popular with constituents. Although Senate Bill 397 could rein in some of those increases, Bentz sees it as an adjustment instead of a rebuke. "There's always room for improvement," he said.

Walmart raises wages for truck drivers

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

As companies struggle to attract qualified truck drivers, Walmart is giving itself a leg up by raising wages for its drivers. Starting Friday, drivers are getting a 1 cent per mile raise and a 50 cent increase in pay for every time they drop off a load. According to a news release from Walmart, the increase means drivers can earn an average of \$87,500 in their first year of employment. Employment website indeed.com lists the nation's average truck driver wages at \$73,222 per year based on data from 1,417,441 job postings and site users over the past year. Jeremy Foreman, Walmart's general transportation manager for Oregon, said in an email to the *East Oregonian* that the increased pay per mile and per drop-off will add up to about \$1,500 more per year for the average driver. "We're also seeing drivers coming from other fleets earning as much as \$20,000 a year more by making the switch to Walmart," he said. Local trucking companies, such as Medelez Inc. and BKJ Tranport in Hermiston, have described difficulty in finding qualified drivers, and the American Trucking Association has estimated a shortage of 50,000 drivers nationwide. Foreman said Walmart's truck drivers are the "backbone of our company," making recruiting safe and reli-



Staff photo by E.J. Harris, File
In this November 2017 file photo, a semi truck enters the Walmart distribution center in Hermiston.

able drivers crucial. Offering high wages and strong benefits helps, he said. Benefits beyond wages offered by the company include the ability to earn up to 21 days of paid time off in the first year, predictable schedules, quarterly safety bonuses and safe parking at Walmart stores. Drivers also don't have to do any loading or unloading of freight. "Our full offering is industry-leading and something we are proud of ... We aren't aware of any companies that offer a broader, better pack-

age for drivers," he wrote in an email. Walmart is one of the largest employers in Umatilla County, with stores in Hermiston and Pendleton and a distribution center in Hermiston. Foreman said many of the trucks coming in and out of Hermiston's distribution center are driven by locals, but some drivers are commuting from as far away as Portland or Nampa, Idaho. As more self-driving cars hit the road, some companies are putting resources into developing self-driving freight trucks. When asked about the possibility of Walmart using self-driving trucks, Foreman said they "are not sure what the future may hold" but are continuing to actively recruit drivers. Necessary qualifications to drive a truck for Walmart include a Class A commercial driver's license, a minimum of 30 months in a full-time Class A tractor/trailer driving position over the previous three years and the ability to pass a background check.

State legislators to speak in video conferences at BMCC

East Oregonian
Two state legislators will meet with members of the public — albeit by video — in a series of video conferences hosted by Blue Mountain Community College and the Pendleton Chamber of Commerce. Starting on Feb. 6, and the first and third Wednesday of each month from

February through June, Sen. Bill Hansell (R-Athens) and Rep. Greg Barreto (R-Cove) will appear via video from Salem, where they're in the middle of a Legislative session. The meetings will be open to all, and participants can ask questions or air concerns, and discuss proposed bills with the legislators. This is the third year

BMCC and the chamber have offered these sessions, and according to a press release from the college, Barreto and Hansell are the only legislators in the state to offer a regular video conference with constituents. "Hundreds of proposed bills cross legislators' desks over the course of the Legislative Session," said BMCC Interim President Connie

Green in the press release. "These video conferences are so valuable because it gives us the opportunity to let our local legislators know what's important to us as constituents, and how various proposed bills have an impact on the College."

If: Gathering brings women together

HERMISTON — All area women are invited to participate in a faith-based gathering with a goal of community building. If: Hermiston 2019 is part of more than 7,000 gatherings that livestream the main event from Dallas, Texas. The local event is Friday, Feb. 8 from 4-9:30 p.m. and Saturday, Feb. 9 from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. The event

is coordinated by New Hope Community Church, 1350 S. Highway 395, Hermiston. Dinner and a light breakfast are a part of the event. There will be a break for lunch for people to eat on their own. Light snacks and coffee will be available throughout the conference. Those planning to attend are encouraged to bring a Bible and wear comfortable clothing. In addition, smartphones can be used as part of the interactive conference through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. While the event is free, donations are welcome. For more information or to register, search Facebook for "If Local Hermiston" or via a link at www.newhopeon395.com. For questions, email if.hermiston@gmail.com.

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