

EASTERN OREGON SEES JUMP IN NEW HOUSING



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Monte Vista Homes has a track record of development in the Hermiston area. The property development company is currently finishing up in their Desert Shadows subdivision.

Communities see increase in building permits for housing

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — After years of struggling to foster more housing, communities in Umatilla and Morrow counties are seeing a payoff with an increased rate of home building.

For years, Hermiston issued about 45 building permits for new homes per year, but in 2017 that jumped up to 60 new homes and in 2018 the city approved permits for 69 new homes and one duplex.

New subdivisions that are currently in the planning stages could push new housing levels higher in the near future. The city recently annexed in land off of Theater Lane and West Elm Avenue that

represent a combined total of 92 new homes developers are planning to build. Another Theater Lane-area project, Cimarron Terrace, is slated to eventually hold close to 100 homes.

Construction of a 49-unit apartment complex off of Sixth Street is also underway, and assistant city manager Mark Morgan said that developers are taking a closer look at the possibility of adding more housing in the northeast part of town as the city works on a new water tower and water mains in the area.

“There has definitely been some interest,” he said.

Bringing new housing to the area has been one of the Hermiston city council’s top goals in

recent years. The city gathered input from developers on what barriers were holding them back from meeting pent-up demand in the area, then worked on corresponding adjustments, such as decreasing setback and lot size requirements.

“Our overall philosophy from the start has been to do what we can do to lay the groundwork for private developers to come in and create housing,” he said, noting the city hadn’t focused on specific types of housing.

Morgan said as the Tri-Cities housing market has increasingly outpaced Hermiston home and apartment prices, that has increased the number of people more interested in staying on the Oregon side.

Hermiston isn’t the only Eastern Oregon city to benefit from a surge in housing. The city of Umatilla issued nine permits for new homes in 2014, 11 in 2015,

14 in 2016, 17 in 2017 and 56 permits in 2018. City manager David Stockdale has said that the city expects that 2018 is not a one-time spike, but the start of a housing boom that will last for years to come.

Umatilla is joining Stanfield and Echo in a comprehensive housing study that is looking at current housing needs in the cities, projected needs 20 years down the road, available residential land and barriers to development. The goal of the project is to come up with recommendations for housing policy to help the three cities meet upcoming demand for housing.

In April, Milton-Freewater’s planning commission considered a plat from Spyglass LLC for a 12-acre subdivision on Key Boulevard that would hold 49 homes.

Pendleton saw a temporary dip in new housing in 2016, but issued 55 single-family dwelling

permits in 2017 and another 55 in 2018. The city is expected to have another strong housing year in 2019, particularly when it comes to adding apartments.

I&E Construction is planning a 204-unit apartment complex, known as the Westgate Apartments, while Pendleton developer Al Plute has repurposed part of the Bowman building into 18 apartments.

Ground was also broken recently on a 100-unit complex at Pendleton Heights.

In Morrow County housing growth has been steadier, but is still happening. The city of Boardman saw a new apartment complex go in during 2018 after employing a wide range of tactics to recruit new housing. Last fall the county launched an in-depth housing analysis in partnership with its five cities, Angelo Planning Group and Johnson Economics.

Strong job market favors job seekers

Robust job market and low unemployment rate can provide a challenge for employers

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — Umatilla County has come a long way since the Great Recession.

The robust job market and unemployment rate hovering below 5% are good news for people searching for work, but can sometimes provide a challenge for employers.

Bud Stephens, who recently opened Stateline Trucking School in Hermiston, said drivers going through the four- to six-week training process have all been graduating with a job — often selected from multiple offers.

“The market is in favor of the drivers,” he said.

Stephens described a “huge” truck driver shortage in the Hermiston area, which sees heavy truck traffic stemming from local distribution centers, such as Walmart and FedEx. Finding qualified long-haul or regional drivers willing to spend days or weeks on the road away from home can be difficult.

“It’s mostly a lifestyle thing,” he said.

Walmart announced last year that they were boosting the pay of their drivers nationwide to help retain employees.

For anyone who would rather stick closer to home, Mid-Columbia Bus Company is always working to recruit drivers for



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Job seekers mingle with potential employers during a job fair recently at the Hermiston Community Center.

school buses in the region.

Amberlina Shafer, a recruitment specialist for the company, said people get intimidated about the size of the buses, but there is plenty of training that goes into the process, and “driving for the kids is actually a very big joy.”

According to a recent report by the Oregon Employment Department, there were 1,629 job vacancies reported in Eastern Oregon (defined as the state’s eight most eastern counties) during 2018.

Seventy-eight percent of the vacancies required no education beyond a high school diploma, while 68% of the openings paid less than \$15 per hour. The average wage was \$14.84 an hour,

jumping over \$30 for people with a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Although there are hundreds of unfilled positions in Umatilla and Morrow counties per year, not all of them are necessarily a match for job seekers. Nearly 200 workers were laid off by Union Pacific Railroad near Hermiston in May, and the jobs that were cut for the most part offered much higher wages than some of the manufacturing and food processing companies who are always recruiting.

There is also a question about what type of work people are willing to do. At Pendleton’s Keystone RV plant it isn’t unusual to see a new hire quit after a week or

two when they decide the manufacturing industry isn’t for them.

“It’s definitely an ongoing struggle,” human resource manager Courtney Wallis said.

For others, however, jobs like the ones at Keystone can be a blessing. The company is willing to hire employees right out of high school with no experience and train them on the job, allowing them to work their way up through the company the longer they stay.

Some companies compete for workers with flexible schedules, extra vacation time or other perks. Human resources manager Rosa Hays of Newly Weds Foods in Pendleton said they offer flex-

ibility for college students to earn money while they’re home for summers and even squeeze in some hours during Christmas and spring breaks if they want.

Alescia Rosenbalm of Wildhorse Resort and Casino said that offering a “great benefits package” helps recruit workers.

“It’s hard finding good quality people to match the positions we have open,” she said.

Those positions can include housekeeping, groundskeeping, cooking, serving food, management and more. Rosenbalm said the past year had been especially difficult finding workers.

Not every company feels they have trouble recruiting workers.

At a recent job fair in Hermiston, Jane DeSimone, a recruiter for Portland General Electric, said the company had fared well on keeping its plants in the area staffed.

“It’s usually not such a problem for us. ... We’re a strong employer with a good reputation and good wages and benefits,” she said.

Layoffs are coming as the company prepares to close its coal-fired plant in Boardman at the end of 2020. For those who aren’t interested in transferring to a different plant or retiring, the company is partnering with Blue Mountain Community College to offer free college classes to employees losing their jobs to the closure.

As some jobs leave the area, others are arriving. Lamb Weston, Hermiston’s largest employer, recently added 150 new employees as part of a \$250 million expansion of its potato-processing plant.