

Hermiston School District makes final payment on pre-2008 bonds

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Hermiston residents will see a tax break after the Hermiston School District made a final payment last month toward all bond debt incurred prior to 2008.

The district expects school bond property tax rates to decrease by an estimated 40 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value for area homeowners. Its general fund property tax will stay at \$4.87 per \$1,000.

"I think obviously this isn't something that happened overnight. It's the result of the district taking financial

responsibility very seriously," Superintendent Tricia Mooney said.

In 1999, \$39.9 million in bonds were approved to fund expansions and remodeling. In 2004, the district refinanced the bonds to shave off almost \$1.6 million dollars for taxpayers and lower the interest rate.

Not all of the district's bonds were paid off — another bond for \$69.9 million, which was approved in 2008, helped to replace West Park and Sunset elementary schools and Armand Larive Middle School. The pay-off dates for those bonds are June 2026 and June 2029.

Voters rejected a bid for a \$104 million bond in



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

Sunset Elementary School was built using a bond passed in 2008. All school bonds passed before the 2008 bond are now paid off.

2017 that would have built a new elementary school off Theater Lane, replaced Highland Hills and Rocky

Heights elementary schools with new buildings and expanded the high school. The district's Facility Plan-

NEXT MEETING

The next Hermiston School District board meeting will take place at 6:30 p.m. Monday at the district offices, 305 S.W. 11th St.

ning Committee has been studying options for smaller bonds.

"Our elementary schools, middle schools, and Hermiston High School have continued to see rapid growth in the number of students we serve, and we expect this growth to continue into the future," Mooney said.

She stated bond funding has allowed the school dis-

trict to address the need for increasing capacity.

Hermiston School District is the largest in Eastern Oregon. According to a report from the Facility Planning Committee on the HSD website, HSD is projected to exceed overall capacity next year and increase 9.2% by the 2022-23 school year.

The increase is expected to require additional modular classrooms for students.

"We take seriously our financial obligations to pay bonds off on time and clear debt off our books. Thank you to the voters who have supported our students and school district over the years," Mooney said.

Oregon FFA receives \$1.43M in state funding

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

SALEM — The Oregon FFA, an agricultural education and leadership organization, will receive funding from the state this biennium for the first time in eight years.

House Bill 2444, relating to agricultural education, flew through the Senate on June 30 by a 27-0 vote. The bill appropriates \$1.43 million to the Oregon Department of Education for FFA to provide financing for enrollment, leadership development and the coordination of 24 state-level competitions.

The funding will help make fees for joining the FFA obsolete. The fees have imposed a barrier for students taking agriculture classes who can't afford the \$20 to join the

FFA, said JD Cant, co-chair for Advocacy with the Oregon Agriculture Teacher's Association.

There are almost 7,000 students already enrolled in the Oregon FFA. Cant said the funding could help as many as 5,000 additional students, who already take agriculture classes, become enrolled in the intracurricular program.

The bill also appropriates \$600,000 in grant money, to extend contracts for FFA advisors into the summer.

Many advisors already provide engagement in projects and mentoring over summer break. Cant said a lot of one-on-one happens during the summer months. He, along with other agriculture teachers, wouldn't stop working during the summer because they want to continue their

programs. But the educators are doing the work for little to no compensation.

Cant, who teaches in Elgin, has worked around 60 days during the summer, only to receive compensation for 24. He said the minimal pay can make recruitment of agriculture teachers difficult.

"It's hard to pull someone out of industry for teaching when the industry pays better," Cant said. "We don't get into this profession to be rich."

Rep Greg Barreto, R-Cove, who could not be reached for comment, initially introduced the bill in collaboration with the Oregon Agriculture Teachers' Association.

Two similar bills for public funding of the FFA were floated in 2017. The OATA procured a lobbyist to help spearhead the effort, but both failed

to pass through Legislature.

"We thought we were on the right track in the 2017 session. I love to think you can get it right the first time, but I don't think that's the process anymore," Cant said.

For years, Wes Crawford, also co-chair of the OATA, said there had been talk of trying to win back some state funding.

"It's been quite a long process," he said.

In the past, the Oregon FFA was funded by the Oregon Department of Education. But as funding declined over a period of two decades, the FFA became reliant on private funding, primarily through the FFA Foundation.

"Now that there's state funding present, it's not going to replace private funding, it's to aid it," Crawford said.

BRIEFLY

TRCI reports in-custody death



Jones

UMATILLA — An inmate died in custody Tuesday afternoon at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla, according to the Oregon Department of Corrections.

Robert Jones, 71, passed away in the infirmary. The Oregon State Police have been notified.

Jones entered DOC custody on October 30, 2008, from Clackamas County with an earliest release date of January 29, 2023.

TRCI is a multi-custody prison in Umatilla that houses approximately 1,800 adults in custody.

Lexington schedules budget hearing after city closure

LEXINGTON — Mayor Marcia Kemp has scheduled a budget hearing for the Lexington City Council after the council's failure to pass a budget by the end of the fiscal year closed city government.

The meeting will take place at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Lexington City Hall, 425 F St. Kemp is also holding an informal community meeting at 7 p.m. Monday at city hall to discuss the issue.

The city council was supposed to pass a 2019-20 budget with appropriations last Thursday, but only one city councilor showed up, denying the quorum needed to get the budget passed before the start of the fiscal year. As a result, the city of 238 lost its authority to spend money.

Kemp said she consulted with the League of Oregon Cities to make sure the council could legally hold a budget hearing on Tuesday, when she hopes the issue will be resolved. City council meetings in Lexington have gotten heated in recent months, and as a result she said she has asked for a deputy from the Morrow County Sheriff's Office to attend both meetings

Hermiston police buckling down on distracted driving

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Last year, the Hermiston Police Department handed out almost 200 citations for operating a motor vehicle while using a mobile electronic device and for careless driving. Now, thanks to a grant, the department aims to hand out more distracted driving tickets.

The department has received a \$4,000 Distracted Driving Enforcement Grant through Oregon Impact, a non-profit that advocates against impaired and distracted driving. The grant will provide about 60 hours of overtime specifically focused on distracted driving.

According to the Oregon Department of Transportation, there are four types of distracted driving — visual, auditory, manual, and cognitive. One of the most prominent behaviors, which can involve all four types of distracted driving, is cellphone use.

Between 2013 and 2017, 20 people in Oregon died and over 1,500 have been injured due to crashes involving cellphone use behind the wheel. This includes 158 people who were injured while in the car with a driver between the ages of 16 and 18, who was using a cellphone at the time of an accident.

"There's a significant difference between talking on a cellphone and texting on a cellphone," said Hermiston Police Department Chief Jason Edmiston. "There may

be some sort of justification for someone talking on a cellphone. Texting on a cellphone, there's no rhyme or reason. Pull over if it's that important."

The grant is the first of its kind received by the HPD, which also pursues grants supporting high visibility and DUI enforcement.

The HPD has an officer whose main focus is traffic patrol. Edmiston said he usually responds to crashes, and that traffic patrol goes beyond catching distracted drivers.

"A lot of criminal activity is mobile," Edmiston said.

A routine traffic stop could result in the return of stolen property, or in the discovery of clandestine substances.

Edmiston said the department has investigated multiple crashes that involved pedestrian use of cellphones.

The number of crashes in the city of Hermiston has increased 10% the past five years as population has

expanded from over 17,340 to 18,200 people.

When the HPD makes a traffic stop for distracted driving, they'll issue the maximum fine for the Class B traffic violation, which is \$1,000. Second offenses, or first-time offenses that result in a crash, can expect a maximum fine of \$2,000 for a Class A violation.

Edmiston said he expects the amount of citations to increase in Hermiston for the duration of the grant.

"Traffic citations are no fun, but they're not the end of the world," he said.

Edmiston's connection to distracted driving is more than just professional.

In 2016, his great-niece, Alexxyss Therwhanger, 19, was involved in a deadly crash south of Pilot Rock. She was living in Hermiston at the time.

Investigations later revealed she had been using her cellphone periodically during the trip.

"That was a 19-year-old who hadn't experienced life yet," he said. "She had everything in front of her and made one mistake. We've all made mistakes, but that one cost her dearly."

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