

Mud Wars: Pendleton girls go from clean and pristine to sloppy mess

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pit. Some girls would likely lose socks and shoes to the muck, despite carefully duct-taping them to their bodies.

The hourlong competition would progress more speedily than construction of the pit earlier that day.

The work actually began a week ago when 150 bales of hay arrived at the arena. Kelly Springer, who works on the school district's facility crew, arranged them in a double border around a long, belt-shaped space. Then came a plastic liner, 36 yards of dirt and lots and lots of water.

On Wednesday morning, Springer and colleague Thad Baum donned waders and stepped gingerly into the pit. They carried shovels and rakes to coax the water and dirt into a more gelatinous, pudding-like consistency. Rocks needed to be removed. Another crew member, Bryan Franklin, used a front-end loader to dump dirt into the soup like flour into gravy. The clock was ticking.

"It's crunch time," Springer said.

He speared his shovel deep into some packed dirt that he tossed into a watery portion of the pit. Several yards away, Baum did the same.

By wandering around in the muck, they functioned as human blenders. Baum took a break from digging to sidestep through the mud, looking like an old-time winemaker stomping grapes.

Later that afternoon, Baum, Springer and Franklin and other crew members were tired. Removed rocks filled the bottom of the front-end loader bucket. The mud pit was beautiful.

As Baum peeled off his waders, he declared the pit "as close (to perfection) as it's going to get."

That night, the pit did its job as a slimy, sludgy battlefield for 17 tug-of-war teams.

The day after, the crew will start making the pit disappear.

"There's a horse show here on Sunday," Springer said. "We have to get it cleaned up fast."



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Stella Rabb, 14, gets pulled over while leading her group of freshman girls, the Princesses, during Pendleton High School's Mud Wars on Wednesday night.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

A sophomore team of lumberjacks pulls during Pendleton High School's Mud Wars at the Happy Canyon Arena on Wednesday night.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

A group of pirates pulls during Pendleton High School's Mud Wars at the Happy Canyon Arena on Wednesday night.

Ambulance: M-F voters need to approve higher taxes or could lose service

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meager amount.

That's why the district has two measures on the Nov. 8 ballot.

The first would dissolve the health district and its tax rate. The second would form the Milton-Freewater Valley Ambulance District with a tax rate of \$1.10 per \$1,000 in assessed value beginning in fiscal year 2020.

Milton-Freewater Area Health District Treasurer George White said that would generate about \$736,000 a year, enough to move the ambulance service into the black and start saving up for a new ambulance.

That higher rate means a homeowner in Mil-

ton-Freewater's city limits would pay \$80.41 more per year, according to district information, while a rural homeowner outside the city would have an increase of \$108.34 a year.

Some of the 15 or so people in attendance said they were on board with paying for an ambulance, but they questioned whether they would need to come back in a few more years and repeat this process.

White said the district board wanted to pursue a rate of \$1.40 per \$1,000, but the city council balked at that high figure, so the \$1.10 amount seems more likely to find traction. He said the district is banking on Milton-Freewater growing at 3% a year to make up



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

George White, treasurer for the Milton-Freewater Service Area Health District, attempts to explain the process and need for the creation of a new ambulance district during an ambulance board meeting in Milton-Freewater Tuesday night.

the difference.

District board members spent considerable

time breaking down the costs of ambulance services. An insulin shot is

\$160, according to district information, heart monitors cost \$40,000 each, and an ambulance itself is \$250,000 or more. White said the business itself is \$500,000 in arrears primarily because insurance does not cover the total cost of rides.

Audience members also asked the board if it has checked to see if other providers might step in, maybe nearby College Place or Walla Walla, just over the Washington border. Board member Wes Koklich said Oregon does not recognize the training of Washington medics and EMTs, so they can only provide help during a major crisis.

The trio of board members also said the number of

calls for the ambulance has increased in recent years, from 876 in 2015 to 1,045 in 2018. This year's calls are tracking to pass 970, and the service is looking to hire more staff to help handle the load.

But without voters agreeing to provide more revenue, White stressed, the district soon will run out of money. Right now, he said, he is providing Milton-Freewater Emergency Medical Services a monthly check of \$11,475 plus paying for other expenses as possible. If voters don't say yes to both measures, he said the district will peter out and Milton-Freewater residents may have to turn to Umatilla County for help.

Smartphone: Military members and others get the opportunity to vote with phones

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will be counted. She noted that overseas mail systems can be unreliable and she was very worried that Washington's threats to pull the United States from the United Nations' postal agency would prevent voters overseas from casting ballots.

"We need to make sure that our military and overseas voters have the not only ability to vote, but they can easily access their ballots in a safe manner," Walker said in a telephone

interview Tuesday. "There was a potential crisis going on."

The disruption to international mail was averted when the United States reached a compromise in September that enabled it to remain in the Universal Postal Union, the U.N. agency that coordinates postal policies among its 192 member countries.

Walker predicted the mobile pilot program that her county will be trying out in a Nov. 5 special election will offer a glimpse of what the future holds.

"My grandkids, great-grandkids, great-grandkids, aren't going to want anything to do with a polling place, let alone a paper ballot," Walker said. "Their expectation is that they have it easily accessible on one of their devices."

The Oregon Secretary of State's Office, which oversees elections in the state, has endorsed the pilot project.

Deputy Secretary of State Rich Vial said in a statement that "by enabling these voters to cast a ballot

using their mobile device ... we can make it easier, and at the same time more secure, for them to cast a ballot from wherever they are in the world."

The effort is a collaboration between the two county elections offices; Voatz, a Boston-based company providing the mobile elections platform; Tusk Philanthropies; and the National Cybersecurity Center.

Voters using the system fill out absentee ballot requests, complete identity authentication and verification on the Voatz

application, and submit their ballots.

"Jackson and Umatilla counties just made history as the first in Oregon to give voters the ability to vote in the same way they conduct most of their other business — on their phones," said Bradley Tusk, founder and CEO of Tusk Philanthropies.

The two counties are the fourth and fifth jurisdictions nationwide to partner with Tusk Philanthropies in its efforts to expand mobile voting. Previously, Tusk Philanthropies partnered

with West Virginia; the city of Denver and Denver County; and Utah County, Utah.

West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner called it a success when it was used in the 2018 election by 144 registered voters from 21 counties who cast ballots from 31 counties.

Warner plans to offer it again in 2020. Warner, a U.S. Army veteran, said he could not vote when he was deployed in 2012 and 2014 because of unreliable mail service and alternative transmission methods.

Amazon: Umatilla County commissioners approve a 15-year property tax break

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"That means each one of the taxing districts in that area will be receiving a portion."

In addition, Amazon will pay \$50,000 a year to Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 for fire safety and \$50,000 a year to the Hermiston School District.

Amazon opted to pay

Hermiston schools, he said, because some of its employees are likely to live in that district. He also said the payment will not diminish the amount of funding the school receives from the state. Commissioner George Murdock said the money to Hermiston schools amounts to a corporate gift.

Umatilla County com-

missioner candidate Patricia Maier of Hermiston questioned what would happen if the county demanded Amazon pay the property taxes.

"That's conjecture," Murdock replied. "In my estimation, if we decline them we won't get anything from them because they'll go somewhere else."

The very reason for enter-

prise zones and the like, he continued, is to incentivize private development.

Mark Morgan also addressed the board. He's the Hermiston assistant city manager and administrator of the enterprise zone. He said he ran the numbers on "how much money we're giving away as a result of all of this" and after "37,000"

calculations determined the deal is "giving away exactly zero."

That notion, he said, assumes the city and county already had those revenues. He claimed the payment based on the \$25 million of assessed value would make Amazon the third biggest property taxpayer in Hermiston and the total deal

would make it the top property taxpayer.

The deal also requires Amazon to pay its workers at least 130% of Umatilla County's average wage. According to the Oregon Employment Department, annual wages in Umatilla County averaged \$40,233 in 2018, thus 130% of that would top \$52,000.