

Audit helps state identify weaknesses in new system

Kinks in public assistance eligibility system expected to be fixed by pilot phase rollout beginning April 2020

By SAM STITES
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SALEM — A new system aimed at streamlining the way Oregonians apply for public benefits will need some retooling before it's implemented next year to be used by about a million Oregonians, a state audit found.

The audit released Wednesday by the state Audits Division exposed a few areas where the state

Oregonians spend applying and waiting for assistance and cutting down on manual work by state employees.

According to Tony Black, DHS project director, the “in-flight project audit” helped his team identify key areas where the new computer system will need to be strengthened, particularly with how data is converted from the older systems.

“We learned some things from the auditors that we’re already acting on,” Black said. “We agreed with the auditors and their findings and are taking action. We’re

confident that when we go live in April the system will be as good as it can be at that point.”

State auditors found that while DHS’ project team has generally done a good job of following industry standards for integrating massive amounts of client information from four different assistance programs — Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and the Employment-Related Day Care program — into one, there are still security risks.

Auditors also suggest

that DHS might not have enough staff to complete the added task of cleaning up data converted from the old systems, which could lead to long wait times and headaches for case workers.

The effort to fold four programs into one process began in 2015 at the direction of the Oregon Legislature. The project is expected to cost around \$510 million with more than 150 state employees and 300 contractors working on it. Once implemented, the project will impact the day-to-day operations of approximately 4,600 case workers in 100 Human Services

Department offices across the state.

According to the audit, public assistance programs made up 46% of all the state’s expenditures in 2018, representing \$13 billion.

Jackson and Josephine counties will be the first to use the new system, now scheduled for next April.

“We’re in testing right now and the system is looking pretty good. We’ve had it down in the pilot counties for demonstration and office simulation. That’s gone well, and our workers are getting really excited about seeing it deployed,” Black said.

Rivoli: Demolition funded by Wildhorse Foundation, PGE and others

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On a recent afternoon, Andrew Picken, president of the Rivoli Restoration Coalition, gazed into the hushed, dimly lit space with something akin to reverence.

“It’s like a cathedral,” Picken said. “It’s a very stunning space. We’re going to protect the grandeur of this place.”

All that remains of the original interior is a stage and the platform where Picken stood. Below, an earth mover parked on the theater’s dirt floor was dwarfed by the enormous room. On the south side, a mosaic of color indicated where stairs and the balcony had once been. High overhead, a roof with a new waterproof membrane protected the 5,000-square-foot building from rain.

The extra layer likely saved the theater from water damage during the Sept. 29 fire that destroyed a neighboring business. Picken watched the raging fire at We Sell Stuff in alarm, worrying about the Rivoli, the Pendleton Underground and other structures on the block. He observed firefighters on a ladder truck spraying the top of the Rivoli to prevent embers from igniting the roof.

“Not a drop of it came into the building,” Picken said. “The roof is water-tight.”

He said the Rivoli is covered by fire insurance and will eventually have a state-of-the-art sprinkler system installed. But he’s glad no insurance claim was necessary.

The coalition has an ener-



A mosaic of colors on the Rivoli’s south wall marks old stairs and a balcony removed from the historic building.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney

getic cadre of volunteers. Saturday morning, some of them painted the theater’s Main Street facade.

Inside, a pair of Kirby Nagelhout Construction Co. representatives answered questions about the project for members of the public who wandered in to get a look at the theater. During one conversation, Jason Terry, the company’s Pendleton division manager, explained to visitors Fritz Hill and Wes Duchek that excavation will create addi-

tional depth for a basement and that a concrete pad and structural steel framing will support the weight of the balcony, stairs, catwalk and everything else.

“Basically, we’re going to build a new building within this building,” Terry said. “Demolition is essentially done. (After excavation of the basement), we start building it back.”

Duchek looked around the gutted space as Terry talked. He remembers coming to the theater as a boy.

“I watched my very first motion picture movie as a kid right up there,” he said, pointing to where the balcony had been. “It was ‘Mary Poppins.’”

The Rivoli opened in 1922 and closed in the 1980s. According to fire maps dating back to 1884, the building earlier housed a Chinese washroom, cigar shop, saloon and barber shop, among other businesses.

Money from Oregon Main Street Revitalization Grant, the Wildhorse

Foundation, PGE, Umatilla County Economic Development and other donors funded the demolition. The coalition continues to write grants and hold fundraisers.

Completion of project planning, a feasibility study, creation of architectural designs, demolition and other tasks so far total about \$500,000. The coalition hasn’t called for bids for the last two phases yet, so the final price tag is difficult to predict, Picken said.

He said the project will

ONLINE

To see architectural renderings of the Rivoli, go to rivolitheater.org.

progress as funding flows in. The coalition has no debt, and annual expenditures of around \$3,000 for taxes, electricity and water. He credits the low overhead to the Pendleton Development Commission, which bought the building for \$38,000 in 2012 and gifted it to the coalition. He is grateful.

“We’re not boxed in. There’s no note,” Picken said. “We clearly have a sense of urgency, but we don’t have a sense of crisis.”

He believes the community will ultimately benefit from the performing arts center.

“We are clear about what we’re going to put here,” Picken said. “It’s going to be a multipurpose community event facility that’s going to increase foot traffic, increase economic activity and raise property values.”

Other towns are farther along in this “tried-and-true strategy for economic development in rural communities,” he said, such as the Gem Theatre in Athena and Astoria’s Liberty Theatre.

Pendleton’s theater will provide a venue for movies, performances, parties and other gatherings.

“The idea is versatility and hospitality,” Picken said. “This will be a host facility, not the home of any one local arts group. It’s everybody’s facility.”

Work: Generation Z looks for work at Eastern Oregon Career Summit

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Pendleton High School sophomores Ellie Samford and McKenzie Penninger were also skipping a lot of the booths because they were interested in veterinary science, a job field that was discussed in the morning session but absent from the job fair.

Some employers were playing the long game, introducing themselves to the students with the idea that they may apply for a job once they get older.

Pedro Sanchez of Boardman Foods said many of the students he encountered would be on the younger edge of the hiring pool for the Morrow County onion processor.

But he wanted the students to know that Boardman Foods was a growing company that could provide them a place to work when they get older.

Sanchez said his own tenure with Boardman Foods started four years ago as an onion trimmer. He has since worked his way up to produc-



Students take time to fill out a worksheet about the Eastern Oregon University booth at a career fair at the Pendleton Convention Center on Wednesday afternoon.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

tion manager, and he thinks the potential for upward mobility could be a resonant pitch for some students.

Sanchez attended one of Bower’s seminars earlier in the morning, and he espe-

cially liked a speech she made about the importance of good management.

It was a part of Bower’s presentation on how to become an “employer of choice” in Umatilla County, a

topic of importance in a state with 4% unemployment.

Although Umatilla County sponsored the career summit and contracts with Eastern Oregon Business Source to provide professional develop-



An Oregon Department of Corrections officer discusses careers with a group of students from Lone High School during a career fair at the Pendleton Convention Center on Wednesday afternoon.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

ment services, Bower said the county government stood out as an example of workplace improvement regardless.

Bower said when she first started working with Umatilla County several years ago, morale was low and employees complained of the workplace being too political

and a lack of equity among departments.

Since then, Bower said the county has focused on creating a clear mission statement and strong internal branding, which she said has led to more job applicants, higher qualified candidates, higher retention, and lower turnover.

Swat: Repairs included coolant leaks along with water pump replacement

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county to acquire.

“We got it donated to us from the city of Hillsboro back in April,” he said.

But Hillsboro was upfront, he said, about the vehicle needing repairs. Pike said there were coolant leaks and a transmission oil leak, and it needed a replacement of the

engine’s water pump, installation of a battery maintainer to keep the batteries charged and installation of seat belts for the driver and front passenger seats.

The vehicle has an “off-breed Detroit four-stroke diesel engine,” Pike said, and parts for that are not so common.

“That’s one thing that held

us up,” he said.

Second-year students Jose Navarro, 19, and Jordan Bender, 19, both of Culver, and Jared Kneale, 20, of Colfax, Washington, were among the group that worked on the rig starting in the spring. They said the college’s diesel tech program drew them to Pendleton, but they had not imag-

ined they would get to work on a SWAT vehicle. Once the parts arrived, they said, the work moved right along. Pike said they finished the project this term.

Roberts said the sheriff’s office could not be more pleased with the BMCC crew.

“They’ve been great partners to work with us,” he said.

Pike said this has been a

great learning opportunity for the students, and organizations such as the sheriff’s office enable the students to gain the skills they need to complete the program.

The sheriff’s office takes the vehicle Tuesday afternoon from BMCC. Roberts said the next step will be to place sheriff’s office graphics on its surface. He said the

sheriff’s office aims to have it ready to go soon and hopes it will be a case of having the SWAT machine but not needing it.

But the students said they are eager to haul around campus in the tough-looking ride.

“Oh yeah,” Navarro said.

“We got to make sure the lights work,” Kneale added.