

City council disagrees with planning commission over mini-storage project

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The Hermiston City Council decided Monday that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, siding with a mini-storage project on land the planning commission had hoped might be preserved for a restaurant or store.

The property in question is a triangle-shaped, 9-acre piece of land stretching between Highway 395 and Northeast Fourth Street on the north side of Rogers Toyota. The tip of the triangle is 40 feet of access off of the highway, which then stretches to 600 feet on Fourth Street.

Steve Richards, who recently built Highland Mini Storage in Hermiston and owns storage facilities in Pendleton and Stanfield, hopes to purchase the property and create another mini storage facility with a live-in caretaker on the back 5 acres of the property, bordering Fourth Street. To do so, he would need the city to approve a Neighborhood Commercial Overlay on the current commercial zoning.

City Planner Clint Spencer told the council that the planning commission thought the property — one of the few undeveloped pieces left along Highway 395 in town — could someday attract a restaurant or other retail operation that will only build on roads with high traffic counts. The city has discussed the possibility of creating an urban renewal district and placing a road on the north side of the property to help make it more attractive to such a business.

“They felt mini-storage was not the highest and best use of the property,” he said.

City Manager Byron Smith said he hears all the time from residents who want



A “For Sale” sign sits at the narrow entrance off Highway 395 to a 9-acre property a developer would like to use for storage units.

the city to attract more restaurants and retail, and while Hermiston also needs storage units, he felt many people would prefer to see that particular space go to something else.

Richards, however, said the property has several limitations he felt will continue to keep retailers out, including a 100-foot-wide Bureau of Reclamation easement running through the property and the narrow 40-foot access off of Highway 395.

“There’s not a lot of visibility there,” he said.

He said other properties zoned for mini-storage were too small, and pointed out that he only planned to purchase 5 of the 9 acres, leaving the land closest to Highway 395 open. And even if the city kept the current zoning, he said, he could still build other non-restaurant options, such as a car wash, RV park or laundromat without needing the city’s permission.

He said area storage units currently have a 93% occupancy rate and many Hermiston residents are spending their money outside of Hermiston

for their storage needs. Out of 112 doors he knocked on, he said, 107 residents signed a petition in favor of the project.

City councilors were not all in agreement about the idea. Roy Barron said he didn’t want to be hasty about allowing mini-storage there when city staff were still looking at running a road through the property that would make it more attractive for retail.

“I don’t want us to be short-sighted in jumping on an opportunity, when we do have other plans,” he said.

Councilor Rod Hardin, who lives near Richards’ Highland project, said those facilities were attractive and improved the neighborhood, and he thought the proposed project would do the same.

Mayor David Drotzmann and several other councilors said the land had been sitting vacant for many years and no one had wanted it so far. They noted that creating an urban renewal district and building a road there would be years in the future and was no guarantee that someone would build

there afterward.

“I’ve never seen anyone interested in that property,” Daniel said.

In the end, Gutierrez, Hardin, Doug Primmer and Doug Smith voted in favor of changing the zoning, while Barron and Jackie Myers voted no. Spencer said he would bring the proper resolution before the council at their next meeting for official adoption.

The council also voted Monday to vacate an undeveloped right-of-way in its South Hermiston Industrial Park to clear the way for a major developer.

The portion of Southeast 10th Street between Penney Avenue and Feedville Road exists only on paper right now, and the city’s transportation master plan does not note a need to create an actual road there in the future.

Spencer said the right-of-way runs straight down the middle of a property slated for major development through Hermiston’s long-term enterprise zone, and giving up the right-of-way to the developer would not landlock any properties.

BRIEFLY

BMCC hires next foundation executive director

PENDLETON — Ken Daniel has been named as the new Blue Mountain Community College Foundation executive director, the school announced on Monday.

Daniel replaces Margaret Gianotti, who will retire Dec. 2 after 12 years in the role. The BMCC Foundation invests and fundraises to support BMCC student scholarships and programs.



Daniel

“I am extremely excited about this new opportunity to build upon the strong foundation that has been laid before me,” Daniel said of his new role at BMCC. “There is so much great potential to grow the philanthropic work for the college and community. I feel very fortunate and humble to be able to work with such a great team of community volunteers and professionals.”

Daniel’s employment history is nearly all in foundation, major gifts and fundraising work. He comes to BMCC from the Family Health & Wellness Foundation in Kennewick, Washington, where he served as executive director. The foundation was formerly a part of Trios Health. There, he planned and implemented private and community fundraising, special events, planned annual giving and major gifts, in addition to directing all donor management.

In 30 months, Daniel grew the foundation’s investment funds by 40%. Prior to that role, Daniel served as the development director of the Spokane Guild School Foundation, where he grew investment funds by 42%, and also worked for 11 years for the Boy Scouts of America as a finance director, director of support services and program director.

Daniel will begin his new role at BMCC on Friday to allow for several weeks of transition time with Gianotti.

Morrow County drug case goes to federal court

HEPPNER — Jeremy Michael Carroll of Boardman now faces drug crime charges in federal court.

Members of the Blue Mountain Enforcement Narcotics Team in late August arrested Carroll, 38, after searching his home about a month earlier and seizing two firearms and more than 1 ounce each of heroin and methamphetamine. The arrest was the result of a yearlong investigation, according to BENT, which referred charges

to the Morrow County and Umatilla County district attorney offices, as well as the United States Attorney’s Office for Oregon due to Carroll’s prior criminal history, firearms and explosives convictions and federal probationary status.

Federal prosecutors on Oct. 18 indicted Carroll with felon in possession of firearms and possession and intent to deliver meth. Morrow County Circuit Judge Dan Hill on Oct. 23 granted District Attorney Justin Nelson’s request to dismiss the case because of the federal charges. Court records show the United States Attorney’s Office charged Carroll the following day.

Carroll remains in the Multnomah County Jail, Portland, under a federal detention order.

Mooney appointed to state commission

HERMISTON — Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney was nominated for appointment to the statewide Quality Education Commission by Gov. Kate Brown.



Mooney

If Mooney is confirmed by the Oregon Senate next month, her four-year term would start on Nov. 25. She would replace McMinnville School District Superintendent Maryalice Russell.

“I am humbled to be nominated. I think Maryalice Russell has been an amazing leader,” Mooney said. “I’m excited to play a part and represent Eastern Oregon at a state level.”

Mooney would work alongside John Larson, former Hermiston High School English teacher and president of the Oregon Education Association. Larson was appointed to the commission last year.

Each biennium, the Quality Education Commission establishes the state’s Quality Education Model, which lists K-12 education goals and expectations for Oregon K-12 public schools.

The commission then recommends how much state funding would be required to meet those goals. The Oregon Legislature has never met the funding suggestions, and during the 2017-19 biennium, the actual amount of funding was \$1.8 billion short of the \$10 billion requirement.

The Oregon Education Association stated the passage of the Student Success Act in May helped bring state funding for the 2019-21 biennium “within reach” of the goal for the first time.

— *East Oregonian staff*

Fair numbers up despite bad weather

Attendance estimated at just under 90,000 for the fair and rodeo combined

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Umatilla County Fair and Farm-City Pro Rodeo attendance ticked up in 2019 despite a thunderstorm that sent attendees scattering one night.

Al Davis, manager of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center, included an update on the fair during his quarterly presentation to the Hermiston City Council on Monday night.

Davis said attendance was estimated at just under 90,000 for the fair and rodeo combined, with about 16,000 rodeo attendees. He said when he checked parking on Wednesday night, parking pass sales were within \$3 of what they had been the year before.

“They’re steady,” he said of the numbers. “We’re not seeing a huge influx up



Lightning cracks over the parking lot of the Farm-City Pro Rodeo in this long exposure image on Aug. 9, 2019. The rodeo was delayed as a result of the lightning as people dispersed to their vehicles for safety.

or down.”

In 2018, fair board member Lucas Wagner told the *East Oregonian* that attendance that year had been estimated at 82,000 — up about 800 from the year before that — but revenue from concessions and other sales was “significantly up,” suggesting it may have been even higher. Rodeo attendance was also estimated at about 16,000 people in 2018.

Davis told the council he thought the severe lightning

that happened on Friday night put a damper on Saturday’s numbers. While the rodeo did resume late Friday night after a break for the storm, many people went home instead of sheltering in their vehicles or in buildings, and the forecast had predicted a strong chance of more lightning Saturday night.

He said they learned a lot from putting the fair’s emergency procedures to the test, including the need to better explain the rodeo would con-

tinue later that night, as per PRCA rules.

“We learned that ‘hunker in place’ turns into ‘evacuate’ real fast,” he said.

He said in today’s climate of frequent mass shootings, people tend to panic and not listen well when police start telling them to leave the area. Councilor Roy Barron also pointed out that Friday was Latino Night, and said that members of the Latino community might have also been more inclined to worry when told by law enforcement they needed to shelter in place.

Davis said there was some backup in the parking lot during that time as EOTEC staff sheltered in buildings away from the lightning, but people still tried to leave the fairgrounds without anyone directing traffic.

As EOTEC has resumed normal operations since the fair, Davis said they had a great third quarter with 33 events, bringing in \$34,000 more in rental fees than the same quarter last year. He said they continue to improve the property, including getting the last of the security cameras installed and running.

Graduation jumps across Morrow County School District

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

HEPPNER— The Morrow County School District, home to nearly 2,300 students at nine different schools, saw a district-wide lift in on-time graduation rates last year, according to Report Card data released by the Oregon Department of Education.

The district’s percentage of on-time graduating seniors jumped five points to 83%, just points above the statewide average of 79% for the 2018-19 school year.

The district also saw a slight increase in its amount of “on-track” freshman last year, up to 94%, and small jumps in the below-average eighth-

grade math and third-grade English language arts proficiency percentages.

“At the end of the day,” said Superintendent Dirk Dirksen, “individual buildings are just really focusing on student by student. We’re making sure students are getting good encouragement and support from teachers.”

The district’s largest high school, Riverside Junior/Senior High School, saw its own 7% jump in on-time graduation last year. But the smallest of the high schools, Heppner Junior/Senior High School, saw a 12% drop down to 76%.

Across the board, the number of graduated seniors who headed straight off to college

remained below average for the district. But to Dirksen, this isn’t necessarily a bad thing.

“We don’t want to limit kids’ opportunities to see that as the only way of being successful,” he said. “There are a lot of jobs right here. There is a focus on opportunity for preparing kids to go right to work, and on technical school education.”

He pointed to the Port of Morrow, and the fact that several larger businesses throughout the county support technical skill development on the job.

Across the district’s elementary schools, proficiency percentages were varied.

At Heppner Element-

tary, 63% of students met grade-level expectations for English, and 43% met grade-level expectations for math, exceeding state averages — 51% and 42% respectively — for both subjects. A.C. Houghton Elementary saw a 20% leap, to 48%, in the number of students meeting math proficiency in Oregon.

Irrigon Elementary saw a 15% increase in the number of students who met English standards, and an 18% increase in the number of students meeting math standards, but the numbers still fell below state averages.

“We want to get above state average,” Dirksen said. “It’s an example of where kids are at. But if you didn’t

pass that, it’s not the end of opportunities.”

He said throughout the district, a lot of students start kindergarten already behind in their learning. If schools can get kids reading and ready to go by third grade, he said, their chances at graduation will be higher.

“We realize the sooner we can get kids caught up, the better,” he said.

Dirksen also noted the district has seen a flattening in enrollment numbers, with some lowered and raised distributions across the county. This year, Boardman schools are seeing 25 more students, while Heppner and Irrigon are seeing fewer pupils than last year.

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