

Laying new tracks



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

A railroad worker cuts a length of track while working on replacing the railroad crossing on Southeast 17th Street near Southeast Court Place on Tuesday afternoon. The replacement was a joint project between RoadSafe and Union Pacific Railroad, according to an email from city engineer Tim Simons. Workers on site said this was the first of three railroad crossing replacements in the Pendleton area.

Umatilla County looking for lawyers

Staff shortage at district attorney’s office has stalled some criminal cases

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — A staff shortage at the Umatilla County District Attorney’s office means District Attorney Dan Primus is taking up more cases in the courtroom himself.

When fully staffed, the office employs nine deputy attorneys to aid the chief prosecutor in filing charges for criminal cases. But one deputy on leave, and another recently leaving the office to pursue private practice on top of an already existing vacancy means right now there are just six.

“We’ve been short by at least one deputy district attorney for over a year,” Primus said. “Workloads are significantly heavier right now.”

As a result, some criminal cases are sitting in the dark.

“It’s not what you want. The longer a case sits, it doesn’t make it easier to prosecute. You want to move when the witnesses can have a better recall. You don’t want stuff to go stale,” Primus said. “I don’t want people’s cases to sit.”

He added that the DA’s office made a commitment to prosecute every case that comes their way, but that meeting the goal is becoming increasingly difficult.

Umatilla County and its deputy district attorneys reached a new labor deal in February 2019 that resulted in a 2% pay increase for the next three years. Salaries for positions at the office vary by experience, and currently range between \$4,890 and \$6,659 per month, according to a job listing posted on the Umatilla County website.

Primus believes the reason for the shortage could have to do with the rural location of the job.

“We’ve tried to recruit. It’s difficult,” he said. “We’re not getting applicants or enough people to apply. I don’t think that Umatilla County is unique to that.”

It’s an issue that Defense Attorney Kara Davis, assistant director at Inter-mountain Public Defender Inc., said she knows well.

In early 2019, the Blue



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan, File

Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus discusses the legal system and his route to becoming a lawyer during a career day at Pendleton High School on Oct. 23, 2019. With the District Attorney’s Office down three lawyers, Primus is back in the courtroom arguing cases.

Mountain Enforcement Narcotics Team made more than 50 drug-related arrests during “Operation Wildfire.” The operation also added additional charges for more than a dozen offenders who were already serving time.

Davis said it’s part of what caused a spike in the number of cases Inter-mountain has taken on.

As a result, the Oregon Office of Public Defense Services recently authorized additional funding to add a 10th attorney position at the private, not-for-profit firm.

That position has been open for a month, and Davis said they’ve received just one application. That person, she said, was also the sole applicant for a position at the DA’s office.

“We’re not even getting people applying. It’s typical, when the market is good we get less applicants,” Davis said. “People want to live in Portland, and near Portland.”

She said in the past, some applicants for public defender roles at the firm have outright said they’ll

take an offer in the Willamette Valley if one comes along.

Davis added that the shortage at the DA’s office isn’t affecting attorneys at her firm, except that some proceedings that used to be efficient are now taking days.

Kelly Stephens, office manager at Blue Moun-

tain Defenders LLC., noted that the staff shortage at the DA’s office could cause more financial burden on all sides when it takes longer for charges to be filed on cases involving the same defendant.

“It’s financially beneficial for everybody when everything’s grouped together,” she said.



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Hermiston man sentenced to prison in kidnapping case

Jeremy Jeppeson was arrested by Pendleton police on Nov. 18, 2019

East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — A Hermiston man indicted in November after police arrested him for kidnapping will spend more than four years in prison, according to court documents.

Jeremy Jeppeson, 42, whose last listed address is in Hermiston, was arrested by Pendleton police on Nov. 18, 2019, after a 32-year-old Washington woman called for help at the Short Stop gas station, 32553 East Punkin Center Road, Hermiston.

The woman reported that Jeppeson, her ex-boyfriend, kidnapped her in Pendleton and kept her against her will in a Ford Windstar on back roads between Hermiston and Pendleton, threatening her life when she attempted to escape.

After she did escape, the Pendleton Police Department located the vehicle in Pendleton on Nov. 18 and arrested Jeppeson on a detention warrant issued by his probation officer in Hood River County.

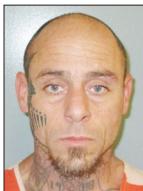
He was later indicted on eight criminal charges, including strangulation, menacing, fourth-degree assault, and three counts of coercion.

But Jeppeson forewent a 12-person jury trial scheduled for mid-January, and took a plea deal in late December.

He pleaded guilty to two charges — second-degree attempted kidnapping and coercion. Both carry a maximum sentence of five years, but in the case presided over by Circuit Court Judge Christopher R. Brauer, he’s facing 25 months for each count, with possible credit for time already served in jail. Each charge comes with three months of mandatory post-prison supervision.

According to the Department of Corrections, and the Hood River County District Attorney’s Office, Jeppeson is currently on supervised probation in Hood River County related to another conviction.

It is unknown where Jeppeson will begin his prison sentence or where he will serve his time.



Jeppeson

Umatilla County submits financial audit for 2018-19

By ALEX CASTLE
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Umatilla County’s financial records came in free of problems for the 2018-19 fiscal year, according to the audit approved at the Jan. 2 board of commissioners meeting.

“I’m happy to report that the financial statements, in our opinion, are materially correct,” said Cameron Anderson from Barnett & Moro, which the county contracts to perform its audits. “We did not have any findings or internal concerns to bring to the board.”

The county’s net position ended at \$91,012,699 in June 2019, which was an increase of \$728,267 in general revenue from where it began the fiscal year. Of that net revenue, Anderson highlighted that \$61,024,818 is tied to the county’s capital assets, including \$1,328,031 in land and construction that’s in progress.

The audit, Anderson explained, is broken into three primary categories: the general fund, public works, and the state’s public employee retirement system, PERS. Revenue that falls outside of these categories is condensed into the “other governmental” fund.

Both the general and public works fund ended with cash and investment

increases in approximately \$800,000, Anderson said, while the county added \$1.5 million to its PERS fund, which brings the fund’s total to over \$5 million.

At the end of 2019, Commissioner John Shafer pointed to the PERS deficit, which has been previously reported at \$27 billion, as one of the challenges facing the county and the more than 300 people employed by it.

Some estimates have shown counties may pay up to 30% of their revenue on PERS by 2021, while Umatilla County has set aside the funding for increased contributions.

The audit report had been filed with the state of Oregon, Anderson said, and in the coming weeks it will be filed with the federal government, too.

“Overall, I’d like to thank Robert (Pahl) and his staff for helping us get through the audit,” Anderson said. “It was relatively smooth, and there’s nothing of note this year.”

At Thursday’s meeting, Commissioner George Murdock shared in commending the work of county CFO Robert Pahl and his staff.

“I think it’s quite important to remember we have a \$90 million budget,” Murdock said. “There’s lots of organizations that only dream about this.”

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