

Winter weather shuts down three highways

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — Oregon Department of Transportation crews are still on high alert after poor visibility and multiple spin-outs Wednesday resulted in repeated highway closures across Northeastern Oregon.

For the second time Wednesday, the state transportation department shut down Interstate 84 and Highway 11 around 5:30 p.m. The interstate was closed between Exit 216 near Pendleton and Exit 302 in Baker City. Westbound lanes between Baker City and La Grande were closed as well. Highway 11 was also closed in both directions starting east of Pendleton at Milepost 5 to Milepost 30 near Milton-Freewater. Highway 204 was closed to all but local traffic to Elgin on Wednesday morning.

“As long as the winds are blowing, I would assume the road will remain closed. People can’t see. It’s icy and there’s a lot of traffic,” said Oregon Department of Transportation Spokesperson Tom Strandberg on Wednesday evening. “It’s 24/7 out on the roads. We’ve got folks from the Pendleton and Meacham crews and crews on the La Grande side.”

The transportation department initially announced the first closure of the interstate between Pendleton and La Grande around 9:30 a.m. Wednesday. ODOT said the closures were due to safety concerns and crashes. The interstate was also closed westbound between La Grande and Baker City. The closures lasted for about five hours, according to ODOT.

“We’ll shut (highways) down for safety concerns,” Strandberg said.

Highway 11 was also closed between Pendleton



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
A line of semitrucks, nearly 2.5 miles long, forms along the edge of Interstate 84 eastbound near Milepost 218 as drivers stop to chain up their trucks before ascending Cabbage Hill Wednesday afternoon.

and Milton-Freewater, but opened back up after four hours at around 2:30 p.m.

The National Weather Service in Pendleton issued a wind advisory Wednesday afternoon for the foothills of the northern Blue Mountains through 10 p.m. Wednesday.

Strandberg said wind speeds on the interstate were between 50 and 60 mph, with gusts up to 70 mph. The wind could increase visibility issues and cause more closures, Strandberg said.

“We are prepared for that eventuality. The wind is expected to continue,” he said.

Usually, when the visibility lowers to a distance of 500 feet or less, the department will consider closing a road down on a case-by-case basis and that ice on the roads can play a factor, Strandberg said.

Between Pendleton and La Grande, trucks were running out of room to park to wait out the closures.

Strandberg said that many drivers will try and use Tollgate Highway to get around closures on the interstate, which can cause dangerous congestion.

“We try to accommodate

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local vehicles as much as possible, but it’s also pretty complicated and a resource issue to man a closure,” he said.

Oregon State Police Lt. Karl Farber said Wednesday afternoon he had not received any reports of major crashes or injuries from troopers on the closed highways.

“Mostly blowing snow is what is creating a problem,” he said. “We’ve got people assisting with chain-ups.”

Farber added that often the interstate will close down near Pendleton because it houses the last truck stop until La Grande. He advised Wednesday that chains are required on that section of the I-84 for all vehicles weighing more than 26,000 pounds.

“Usually with these conditions there’s more snow on the ground,” Strandberg said. “There’s not a whole lot of snow on the road, but these are blizzard conditions.”

BRIEFLY

Hermiston mayor files for re-election

HERMISTON — Mayor David Drotzmann has filed to run for re-election as Hermiston mayor.

Drotzmann is currently in his third term after first being elected in 2012.

“I hope to continue the good work my fellow councilors, city staff, community, and I have accomplished over the last eight years,” he said in a statement.

His involvement in the Hermiston community includes coaching softball and participating in Rotary Club, and he has volunteered with the Hermiston School District in various capacities, including serving on the Hermiston Booster Club board and eight years as a member of the school board previously.

According to his campaign announcement, during the mayor’s tenure Hermiston assessed value has grown by 42%, and the population has increased by approximately 10%, to make Hermiston the largest city in Eastern Oregon.

Drotzmann said he will continue to focus on “fiscal transparency, economic development, housing, infrastructure, public safety, expanding parks and recreation programs while con-

tinuing to make Hermiston a great place to live and raise a family.”

Additional candidates have until March 10 to file a declaration of candidacy with the city recorder. If two or fewer candidates file by that date, then the May 19 election will be considered the general election and the winner will become mayor in January 2021. If more than two candidates file, the May election will become a primary race with a runoff in the November election.

Mayoral terms in Hermiston were previously two years, but a change to Hermiston’s charter that voters adopted in 2015 changed it to four years.

Hermiston’s four at-large city councilors will also be up for re-election this year, but not until November.

Council to accept applications for open seat

PENDLETON — At a Pendleton City Council workshop Tuesday, Mayor John Turner laid out the process the council would use to replace the late Ward 2 Councilor Scott Fairley.

In accordance with the city charter, Turner said the council would vote to declare Fairley’s seat vacant at its Jan. 21 meeting and

will begin soliciting applications for appointment to the rest of the seat’s term, which runs through the end of the year.

The application deadline is Feb. 3. Interviews will be held the following day before the council makes its decision at the Feb. 4 meeting.

All applicants must reside in Ward 2, which is mainly comprised of the North Hill but also includes Westgate and the airport.

If the eventual appointee wants to stay on the council beyond 2020, they will have to file for election by March 10 and run in the May 19 primary.

The last appointment the council made was in 2018, when members appointed Chuck LeValle to fill the rest of the late Ward 1 Councilor John Brenne’s term. But LeValle would only end up serving for a few months after he was defeated in the election by Carole Innes.

— EO Media Group

Council starts planning out when to start new street taxes

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The Pendleton City Council could begin implementing its more than \$1 million plan to fix the city’s roads within the next month.

In December, the council approved a road funding revenue plan that includes a 4-cent gas tax, a \$2 hotel room tax, and a \$3 increase to the street utility fee.

Council members spent a Tuesday meeting plotting out how the revenue plan would be implemented in 2020.

The council discussed the implementation schedule and the hurdles that remain to raise more money for Pendleton’s failing street system.

Gas tax

The council already decided it wanted to put a 4-cent gas tax question on the May ballot, but City Attorney Nancy Kerns said the council should pass a resolution that starts the process at its Feb. 4 meeting.

Kerns said the council has the option of capping revenue generated by the tax. If gas tax revenue exceeds the cap, the rate would be lowered to come under it.

The idea didn’t gain much traction with the city council. Mayor John Turner said the council didn’t institute a similar cap for the marijuana sales tax.

Turner added that such a cap could hurt the city’s ability to fix streets because the cost of repairs go up over time but the revenue stream would remain stagnant.

“We won’t be able to purchase 10 years from now what we could purchase one year from now,” he said.

The council reaffirmed that it wanted a 10-year sunset provision in the bal-

lot measure, which would require the city to either seek voter approval to continue the tax after a decade, or let it expire.

Utility fee

Raising the street utility fee will be a less laborious process because it’s building on an existing \$5 fee passed by the council in 2015 rather than creating a new tax altogether.

Kerns said she could have a proposal ready in February, but there were still a few questions to answer.

Public Works Director Bob Patterson asked whether the council wanted to keep its current funding formula from the street utility fee, which targets neighborhood, residential streets: 70% for streets in good condition and 30% for roads in poor shape.

Turner said he wanted to make sure that residents who were paying the fee would be able to see improvements to the streets they drive on in the near future.

“I worry about erosion of citizen confidence,” he said.

The council seemed to like the idea of extending the 70-30 split to the whole street system rather than just neighborhood streets.

The council also wanted to shield low-income ratepayers from the effects of the fee hike, but debated whether it should be a percentage discount or waive the fee increase entirely.

Patterson suggested the council adopt a 35% discount on the overall street utility fee for eligible accounts that could be adjusted for inflation over time, which the council seemed to agree with.

Hotel tax

Implementing the hotel tax might face the most

complicated process to come to fruition.

The idea of a hotel tax has already drawn opposition from local hoteliers and the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association, and Turner said he expects scrutiny of the tax from both groups.

Even if the council passes the tax, Kerns said it would be subject to a referendum petition, which would throw the issue to the November ballot if successful.

The new lodging tax would also be subject to state law that requires cities to direct only 30% to the general fund while the rest must go to support a tourist-related facility.

To ensure all the hotel tax money goes toward roads, City Manager Robb Corbett said the city could swap revenue the Pendleton Convention Center earns from fees and services with the hotel tax revenues.

Corbett told the council he wanted more time to study the issue before coming back to the council with a recommendation.

Other factors

The plan also includes cutting \$110,000 from the general fund budget to free up more money for road repair. The council will begin meeting about the 2020-21 budget in the spring.

Turner said a committee will begin meeting to discuss an event ticket fee on Thursday.

The council previously discussed the idea as another road revenue generator, but members held off on it after facing opposition from organizations like the Pendleton Round-Up Association and Stadium Entertainment, the company behind Pendleton Whisky Music Fest.

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