

OUR VIEW

Stepping up to help shelter

Stepping up to volunteer to help your community can be a difficult decision, but the need locally for help only continues to rise.

A good case in point is the Hermiston Warming Station for the homeless, which last Sunday was forced to keep its doors closed for the night because there were not enough volunteers.

The closure because of lack of volunteers is the second time in the last three months the local shelter shut down.

Hermiston Warming Station board chair Teesie Hill said in a recent story in this newspaper that more than 100 people were trained at the start of the winter season, but 40 of those have not signed up for any shifts so far. The emergency shelter needs about nine people each night. The shelter will go forward by adjusting some of the shifts and Hill said she hopes that change will prompt more people to step up and help.

The number of per night guests at the shelter is down — from 18 to about six — from last year to this year, and while that may seem like a



EO file photo
Hermiston Warming Station board vice chair Addie Zumwalt paints a sign at the shelter in preparation for opening during the 2017 season. This year could be delayed due to a lack of volunteers. The shelter had to stay closed earlier this week due to insufficient volunteers.

good sign, the need remains.

Even one homeless individual sleeping outside at night during the winter months is too many. As Americans and Eastern Oregonians, we often proclaim ourselves as an independent, hard-working people who are also generous. We are quick to

help the victims of a fire or a terrible accident and to seek to help school and civic organizations. But we can't declare and act on our good intentions only when it suits us or desert its wider implications only if the cause is attractive.

That's why we must all work

together to make our community a better place to live and work, and a better community means watching out for all and stepping up, even when it may be perceived to be uncomfortable.

Democracy works for many reasons, but one of its major pillars is the ability of Americans and Oregonians to give back to the community, to volunteer and help.

We all live busy lives, but taking just a few hours out of the day to help at a place like the Hermiston Warming Station not only makes a big difference there, but also helps enhance the entire community.

The warming shelter is hosting volunteer training sessions, listed on their Facebook page, every day from Jan. 24-30 at varying times. And for those who aren't able to or interested in helping cover evening shifts, the shelter needs donations of single-serving soups to go and other supplies.

So, if you can, think about volunteering at the warming shelter, and then give it a try.

OTHER VIEWS

Owyhee legislation is flawed

Editor's Note: Do you have a point you'd like to make or an issue you feel strongly about? Submit a letter to the editor or a guest column.

Sen. Ron Wyden and Sen. Jeff Merkley have introduced the "Malheur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee Act" (MCEOA). The senators can be commended for taking on such a controversial issue and trying to find a solution for public lands protection.

While the bill would designate more than a million acres of new wilderness and, among other positive things, establish a native plant nursery, MCEOA has so many bad provisions that are not in the public interest that it should be opposed.

The legislation starts out with some high-minded language that asserts: "The purpose of this Act is to promote the long-term ecological health of the Federal land."

However, it then promotes policies that are inconsistent with that goal. The legislation reads as if written by Malheur County ranchers, and bends over backward to mandate and promote livestock grazing.

The legislation makes several false assertions, like alleging that livestock may be used for the ecological "improvement" of public lands. Yet, livestock production is the single greatest source of damage to riparian areas, species endangerment, spread of weeds and flammable plants like cheatgrass, killing of native predators like coyotes and wolves, pollution of water, spread of disease like transmission of pneumonia from domestic sheep to bighorn sheep, and forage competition with native herbivores from ground squirrels to elk. And there is the annual dewatering our rivers to grow hay for livestock feed.

MCEOA goes beyond most legislation to demand that the federal government "protect ... western traditions." Why is supporting a lifestyle (which, given the above issues, could be more characterized as a deathstyle) that depends on the degradation of the public property considered a value worthy of protecting?

The legislation hands over local land management to a Malheur Community Empowerment for Owyhee group (CEO) that will appoint members to another advisory group — both clearly designed

to maintain local rancher control over federal lands. These groups would oversee grazing and monitoring on public lands (what about the BLM employees?) and promote vegetation manipulation projects (like planting non-native grasses for cattle consumption and/or removal of native juniper and sagebrush).

In effect, MCEOA legalizes what the Bundy hoodlums tried to do by force — it excludes the larger public from the public lands decision-making process and makes livestock grazing the main focus of public lands management.

Agriculture, which includes a lot more than grazing, only contributes 1.6% to Malheur County residents' income. The percentage resulting from livestock production on public lands is a tiny fraction of this total.

While on the surface the designation of approximately 1.1 million acres of new wilderness would seem to be a positive feature of the legislation, there are many problematic aspects to even this part of bill. The bill would release from interim wilderness protection some 209,521 acres of existing wilderness study areas, and release another 856,199 acres of lands of wilderness character. In the end we lose more protection for public lands than we gain by wilderness designation.

The MCEOA sets a really bad precedent by reducing environmental analysis of site-specific project review that is currently legally mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

This legislation is also filled with taxpayer-funded and questionable projects — totaling around a billion dollars over 10 years — but nothing to pay or even allow private party grazing permit buy-outs. Mind you that grazing on public lands is a privilege and could be eliminated at any time. Grazing permit buy-out generously pays a rancher to give up grazing privileges.

Without significant changes in this legislation, even the establishment of approximately 1.1 million acres of new wilderness is not worth the precedent-setting bad provisions of this legislation.

George Wuerthner is a former BLM botanist and author of 38 books. He lives in Bend.



GEORGE WUERTHNER
COMMENT



YOUR VIEWS

Conditions are required before supporting new road funding

I have thought long and hard about whether to support the new taxes to support our poor streets. I'm sure, like many of you, another tax is hard to accept. Before I can offer my support, I will need the city government, Mayor John Turner and all city councilors to pledge the following:

Whereas the city of Pendleton is in great need of money (revenue) to repair and maintain the streets and roads within the city limits:

- Accept that past and current administrations, LEOs and city staff have diverted revenue from state gas tax and other sources dedicated to maintaining said streets and roads, which created this problem;
- Promise, in the form of a statute or binding agreement, that all existing and new revenue will be used strictly for street and road repair and maintenance. Those funds cannot be diverted for any other purpose, but kept in an escrow account to be only used for said street and road repair. Other allowed uses for this revenue, such as water and sewer repair/upgrade, utility costs, consulting fees or contracts, or operating street lights or any other purpose, will cease until escrow account has a \$2

million daily average balance for a period of three years, and if account drops below \$2 million a spending freeze of non-street/road maintenance will result until balance exceeds \$2 million again.

- Any new tax, either in the form of a gas tax, utility/water/sewer bill tax, room tax, or any other additional tax, must have a sunset of eight years, and can only be continued with a vote of the people.

I realize that this severely limits how this money can only be spent on maintaining our streets and roads, but also realize that poor spending habits in the past has gotten us into this problem in the first place.

Only if the above actions are taken and met before the next election cycle that has the gas tax and other revenue sources on the ballot will I offer my support of this increase in taxes. As I mentioned above, the current city government and city staff are not wholly responsible for this road condition crisis — much of this happened over the past 20 years or so — but they can be the ones that do the right thing and solve this problem for the long term.

Please, be proactive and show the residents of Pendleton that you are responsible with our tax money and regain any lost trust the residents have demonstrated recently. Good Luck.

Neal Simpson
Pendleton