

Helix Telephone Co. changes ownership

By BEN LONERGAN
East Oregonian

HELIX — An end of an era came with the change to the new year for the Helix Telephone Co.

The sale of the telephone company to Oregon Telephone Corp. of Mount Vernon closed Dec. 31, 2019, ending the nearly half century of Smith family ownership of what was once the smallest independently owned telephone company in the state.

The Helix Telephone Co. currently operates approximately 185 lines and had been owned and operated by the Smith family since 1972, according to former co-owner Tim Smith.

“I don’t think there will be too much of a change for the customers,” he said. “I think it’s going to work out well for everyone in the community.”

Brothers Jim and Tim Smith of Helix have run the company since their parents’ retirement in 1998 and have worked to bring addi-



Former Helix Telephone Company co-owner Jim Smith gestures toward equipment while explaining how the telephone exchange works in the Helix Telephone Company central office in Helix on Feb. 14, 2012.

tional services, such as the internet, to the company’s customers.

Jim Smith said rumors of the sale began spreading around town when he moved out of the company house and into a smaller place in

Helix late last year as he prepared for his retirement. He said while it is hard to leave, it was just the right decision at the time.

“It’s hard and sad for me to leave, but I was ready to retire,” he said. “I’ve been

working there since before I graduated high school. This would have been my 41st year there.”

Jim Smith said he and his brother had been looking to sell the company and the decision was centered on

finding someone who would be a good fit to carry it into the future. While both Tim and Jim Smith have children, Jim said the company was too small to support all of the children and they had decided to follow other career paths.

“We didn’t just want to settle for some bigger outlet,” Jim Smith said. “We sought out Oregon Telephone because they fit with who we are.”

The Smith brothers said they felt especially comfortable selling the business to Oregon Telephone Corp. because it is a family-owned operation. Oregon Telephone Corp. was founded in 1914 and is owned by the Bott family of Mount Vernon. The company operates more than 2,000 phone lines and has roughly 3,000 internet customers, according to DeeDee Kluser, the general manager for Oregon Telephone Corp.

Kluser said the company has purchased rural telephone operations on several occasions in the past

and saw this as an opportunity to expand into a new community.

“We’re very community minded,” she said. “We want to be involved in the community and support local contractors and fundraisers.”

While the sale and Federal Communications Commission approval have been completed, Jim Smith said he will not be fully free of the company until March as he helps to navigate the switchover. Jim’s younger brother, Tim Smith, will stay on to run day-to-day operations and service calls at the Helix office.

Despite the family business coming to an end, both Smith brothers fondly recall their time with the company. Jim Smith said it will be hard to be in Helix and not involved in telephone operations, while Tim Smith said it will be an adjustment not going to work with his family every day.

“I used to own it, but now I don’t,” Tim Smith lamented. “I’m going to miss it.”



Potatoes run on a conveyor belt at a Lamb Weston processing plant. Lamb Weston’s Hermiston operation was among several companies that the Department of Environmental Quality issued fines to in December.

DEQ fines Lamb Weston for wastewater violations

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Lamb Weston was among several companies that the Department of Environmental Quality issued fines to in December.

DEQ sent out a news release on Wednesday announcing 17 fines, including two for alleged wastewater violations at Lamb Weston’s Hermiston operation.

In the first, DEQ issued a \$10,000 civil penalty for unauthorized modification of their wastewater permit.

According to the notice, in June 2018 Lamb Weston connected a sanitary sewer

line to their industrial wastewater processing facility that is “not designed to, or capable of, treating domestic sewage and abating the threats posed by the bacteria and human disease pathogens found in domestic sewage.”

That mixed wastewater was then applied to land where crops were grown for human consumption, until the line was discovered and disconnected in June 2019.

DEQ issued a second fine of \$6,800 to Lamb Weston. According to the complaint, on May 14, 2019, a surge in Lamb Weston’s wastewater treatment and disposal system caused the system to overflow, sending approx-

imately 6,500 gallons of industrial wastewater into the Umatilla River.

The *East Oregonian* contacted Lamb Weston for comment on Wednesday but the company had not submitted any information as of Friday afternoon.

Other companies fined by DEQ in December included operations in the Portland metro area, the Bend area, Medford and Newport.

So far the agency has announced one fine for the month of January, of \$1,296,885 to Hydro Extrusion USA in The Dalles. The aluminum recycling facility was fined for “multiple flagrant air quality permit violations.”

Oregon unemployment drops to a historically low rate of 3.7%

By DONALD ORR
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Oregon’s unemployment rate dropped to 3.7% in December 2019, the lowest on record dating back to 1976, according to the Oregon Employment Department.

Nick Beleiciks, an economic analysis manager at the department, said the latest estimates suggest there are fewer unemployed Oregonians now than at any point since comparable records began.

“That’s especially striking considering Oregon’s labor force is twice as large as it was 44 years ago,” said Beleiciks in a statement.

OED economist David Cooke said the unemployment rate has been around 4% for the last three years — it was 3.9% for November. As a result, Cooke said

Oregon’s economy is experiencing an increasingly tight labor market.

“The number of people who have been unemployed for less than half a year dropped to 64,300 people in December, the lowest on record dating back almost 20 years,” Cooke said.

“That figure had been up to as high as 180,000 during the recession.”

Oregon saw payroll employment jump by 800 jobs overall in December, following a gain of 3,800 jobs in November as revised by the department. Jobs in the leisure and hospitality industry saw the biggest gain with over 2,000 jobs.

Industries that took a loss were professional and business services, cutting 1,600 jobs, and health care and social assistance cutting 900 jobs in the course

of the month.

While health care and social assistance jobs were cut in December, the industry is rapidly growing, adding 7,000 jobs over the last 12 months in Oregon at a 2.7% gain. Some of the fastest-growing industries in Oregon over the last 12 months were private educational services, transportation, warehousing and utilities. Retail trade, mining and logging saw a net loss of jobs over the year.

Oregon’s over-the-year job growth in 2019 was 1.4%, matching the rate of national job growth. Most of Oregon’s major industries expanded between 1% and 3% since December 2018.

The Oregon Employment Department plans to release county and metropolitan area unemployment figures on Tuesday.

BRIEFLY

Heppner chamber reschedules annual luncheon

HEPPNER — The annual luncheon of the Heppner Chamber of Commerce was postponed due to recent inclement weather.

The gathering is now rescheduled for Thursday, Jan. 30 at noon in the dining room at St. Patrick’s Senior Center, 190 N. Main St., Heppner. Those still needing to RSVP are asked to do so as soon as possible.

The no-host luncheon, which is \$10, will be catered by Heppner Market Fresh. The meal features French dip sandwiches, green salad and cake for dessert.

In other chamber news, tickets are still available for Heppner Chamber’s Town

and Country Community Awards. The event is Thursday, Feb. 6 at 6 p.m. at the Gilliam and Bisbee Building, 106 E. May St., Heppner.

Advance tickets are \$30, which can be purchased at the Bank of Eastern Oregon, Murray’s Drug, the city of Heppner and the chamber office, all in Heppner. Beginning the week of Feb. 3., the price increases to \$35 each.

For more information, contact the chamber at 541-676-5536 or heppnerchamber@centurytel.net.

Cornerstone Gallery & Cafe to be remodeled

HEPPNER — The Cornerstone Gallery & Cafe is getting a facelift.

The Heppner Cham-

ber of Commerce recently announced that due to the Cornerstone remodeling, the business will be closed throughout the month of February. They are expected to reopen in March.

The gallery features unique one-of-a-kind gifts, hand-crafted artifacts and the works of local artists. The cafe offers espresso, panini sandwiches, smoothies and more. Cornerstone is looking forward to providing “something new and exciting to serve our community,” said Sheryll Bates, Heppner chamber executive director.

Cornerstone Gallery & Cafe is located at 388 N. Main St., Heppner. For more information, call 541-676-8011.

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