

City to negotiate for land at Geer/Harper intersection

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — City staff have a green light on pursuing property at the intersection of Geer, Harper and River roads in Hermiston in order to make the intersection easier to navigate.

The city council discussed the proposed \$1.5 million project on Monday. Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said the Y-shaped intersection is confusing and has had at least nine reported crashes since 2004, but the biggest problem is there is not much room for cars to “stack” up when the intersection gets busy, particularly if multiple people want to turn onto River Road.

“You can fit one, maybe two vehicles between the intersection and the railroad tracks,” he said.

City engineers Anderson Perry & Associates conducted a traffic study and found a mix of semitrucks visiting places like Home Depot and Marlette, plus personal vehicles coming in from Umatilla or visiting Theater Lane-area neighborhoods.

They devised several different options for realigning the intersection, each with pros and cons.

A single-lane roundabout would keep cars flowing



Cars navigate a the intersection of Geer, Harper and River roads in Hermiston on Tuesday afternoon. The intersection is on Hermiston’s priority list for street improvements.

smoothly in and out but would be completely shut down any time a train came through the area.

Moving the railroad crossing down to Theater Lane would untangle the traffic at the current intersection, but it is much more expensive and would put people trying to turn from River Road onto Theater Lane at risk of being rear-ended by drivers coming around a corner at high speeds.

The preferred option, Morgan said, is the configuration labeled Figure 5, which

involves multiple turn lanes and “slip lanes” to keep traffic flowing and create more room for vehicles to “stack” while waiting to turn.

“This serves peak traffic best,” Morgan said.

That option, like all of the options that keep the crossing where it currently lies, would necessitate expanding into property on the east side of the intersection. The two odd-shaped parcels needed total about 0.8 acres and was appraised at \$65,000. County property tax records list the owner as Tommy Huxoll

of Hermiston.

The ordinance before the council on Monday declares that privately owned property a necessity for the project and allows staff to begin negotiations on purchasing the property. If the property owner does not voluntarily accept an offer, the ordinance would allow the city to consider using eminent domain to compel a sale at fair market value.

Councilor Manuel Gutierrez was the only vote against the ordinance, which passed 6-1.

OTHER COUNCIL BUSINESS

HERMISTON — Byron Smith told the Hermiston City Council Monday night that the city planned to put out an online survey soon in order to gauge public opinion on options for city hall.

The current city hall building had a fire in December that caused about \$100,000 worth of damage to the building itself. The council had previously been discussing building a larger, wheelchair-accessible city hall in a few years, and now needs to decide whether to put the insurance money into repairing the old building or press ahead with building a new city hall now.

Smith said staff have been researching costs and other information related to a rebuild versus repair, and plan to present their findings at the Feb. 10 city council meeting. Sometime between then and their Feb. 24 meeting the city would hold a public outreach meeting to gather more feedback, with the hopes that councilors would get any final questions answered and make a decision on Feb. 24.

Parks and recreation manager Larry Fetter also gave the council an update

about a major city project on Monday night. He has been overseeing efforts to rebuild Funland playground, which burned to the ground last May.

Fetter presented some design options for the playground to the council in December, created by a citizens committee working with a playground-design company. Much of the feedback he received from the council centered on cultural elements of the playground. Councilors said they wished there was more representation of Hermiston’s Hispanic population, and said they were only comfortable with including proposed American Indian elements if local tribes approved.

Fetter said he visited a meeting of the city’s Hispanic Advisory Committee and got some “great” feedback on cultural elements to incorporate.

He said he had thought he was doing well with the tribes, but discussions had since “stalled out” and he was now working on a Plan B for that section of the playground.

— Jade McDowell, East Oregonian

Man pleads innocent in July slaying of Whitman employee

By EMILY THORNTON
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — A man accused of killing a Whitman College employee pleaded not guilty Monday in Walla Walla County Superior Court to first-degree murder and vehicle theft.

Colby J. Hedman, 24, whose last known address was in Heppner, was ordered in November 2019 to receive three months of “competency restoration treatment” at Eastern State Hospital in Medical Lake after lawyers doubted his ability to stand trial.

Previous plans to formally arraign Hedman, or hear charges and record his plea, were postponed pending the treatment evaluation results.

Walla Walla County Prosecuting Attorney Jim Nagle said in an earlier interview that Hedman would plead only “if his competency is restored.”

In court Monday, Hedman’s appointed attorney, Jesse Montagnino, said he planned to “follow up with an insanity evaluation.”

Competency refers more to the defendant’s ability to understand

what’s happening in court, while insanity refers to the his state of mind during the alleged crime and is used as part of the defense’s argument.

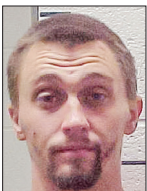
Judge John Lohrmann set a trial date for March 24, which may be delayed as the defense team seeks additional information.

Hedman’s bail was set at \$1 million in September, after he was extradited from Baker County in connection with the slaying of Kyle Martz, 35, of Walla Walla, in July.

Hedman admitted to police at his arrest that he struck Martz with an ax multiple times before stealing his car and fleeing to Oregon, where he was arrested trying to elude police.

Officials suspect Hedman and Martz didn’t know each other.

Later that same day, court records state Hedman allegedly broke into a home on Taggart Lane in Oregon and tried to steal a different vehicle, which he totaled after leading police on a chase that ended in his arrest, reports stated.



Hedman

Helix School District explores new improvements

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

HELIX — With a total enrollment of less than 200 students, the Helix School District has long-term goals that feel modest in comparison to larger districts: hire a Spanish teacher, install security cameras, buy a van.

But the Helix School Board recently praised Superintendent Darrick Cope for his work on the goals while noting there was still work to be done.

“The position of Superintendent/Principal in Helix requires focus, discipline, determination, and firm leadership,” board Chairman Todd Thorne wrote in a Jan. 7 letter from his formal evaluation. “Darrick continues to do an excellent job in this capacity.”

Like every other school district in the state, Cope said in an interview Monday that the district is trying to decide how to best spend the incoming revenue from the Student Success Act.

That new source of money could go toward restarting Helix’s dormant language program and hiring a Spanish teacher, a faculty member Cope estimates the school hasn’t had in 20 years.

Cope said the main obstacle to hiring a foreign language teacher is finding someone qualified to teach a small group of students for two periods only.

Helix hopes to get around that by using the Student Success dollars to hire a school counselor who could spend



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

A sign welcomes visitors to the Helix School District on Monday afternoon in Helix. The Helix School Board recently completed a favorable review of Superintendent Darrick Cope, praising his work toward completing the district’s long-term goals, such as enhanced security, a return to a 100% graduation rate and the purchase of a district van.

a couple of periods teaching Spanish.

Cope said he’s also considering directing the new revenue to start a preschool program at Helix School.

He added that the grants that could help Helix start a preschool are typically reserved for high poverty and low equity school districts. In comparison, only about 1 in 5 Helix students qualify for a free or reduced lunch.

While Cope is interested, he wants to wait and see if any other school districts use their increased revenue for pre-K programs before pursuing it further.

In the wake of school shootings across the country, several school districts in the area retrofitted their school facilities to add additional security measures.

Without the aid of a bond,

Cope said Helix saved up for years to afford new security features at the school.

While some of it was a change in practice — locking all doors that aren’t at the main entrance during school hours — the district also bought new equipment like security cameras, a set of electronically controlled doors, and an intercom system.

Cope said it’s been an adjustment period for parents used to looser access, but it’s for the best.

The superintendent has also been eyeing a van for extracurricular transportation as another capital expenditure.

The idea was borne out of the driver shortage at Mid Columbia Bus Co., which often left school athletes without a ride to events when Midco couldn’t spare a bus. That means athletes were

often transported in staff’s personal cars, a setup Cope is uncomfortable with as a long-term solution.

Cope said the van the district is looking at can only transport 10 people, including the driver, but it still might be the best alternative.

“I think we’ll pull the trigger on that one,” he said.

The Helix School District serves one of the smallest communities in the state, but it’s able to stay sustainable by drawing in out-of-district transfers interested in Helix’s small class sizes and strong academics.

The district recently announced that 15 of 16 students graduated last year, with the only non-graduate electing to seek a GED instead of a diploma.

In a statement, Cope said Helix’s goal was to return to a 100% graduation rate.

“I think with the strategies we now have in place, we can achieve this goal,” he said. “We have to remember that these rates are not just numbers, they represent our students, and success can be measured in different ways.”

The district’s high expectations also apply to standardized tests.

Although Helix’s eighth grade math scores on the Smarter Balanced test were just above the state average, Cope said the district intends to buy a new elementary math curriculum.

He said the new curriculum better aligns with the test and has better diagnostic tools.



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