State presents review of Umatilla County Public Health

Nurse-Family Program partnership with Morrow County lauded during review

By ALEX CASTLE
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — After going through its usual checkup with the Oregon Health Authority last year, the Umatilla County Public Health Department was praised at Wednesday's board of commissioners meeting for the results of its findings.

The Oregon Health Authority comprehensively reviews local public health authorities every three years to assess compliance with state and federal standards, along with providing an overall department evaluation and recommended improvements.

Fiumara

"Congrats to you and to the staff," Umatilla County Chair John Shafer told Public Health Director Joe Fiumara at the end of the presentation. "You've clearly done an amazing job."

Umatilla County's department was reviewed in July and August of last year, and though there were and still are needed improvements, Danna Drum, the strategic partnerships lead with the Oregon Health Authority, was complimentary while presenting the findings.

"Overall, I think this was a good review," she said. "I expect all of the improvements still needing to be made, will be."

Drum commended the commissioners for their support and commitment to public health in the county, while also pointing to the county's ability to communicate internally and collaborate around the state as a strength.

Among those successful collaborations is the Nurse-Family Program partnership with Morrow County, which Drum highlighted for its success since being implemented in 2012.

The program pairs a registered nurse with a first-time mother of any age before they are 28 weeks into their pregnancy. The nurse will then meet and advise the family throughout the first two years of the child's life.

According to data from the Oregon Health Authority, the program has served 141 mothers across the two counties since it was implemented. Two-thirds of those mothers were back at work after the two years concluded, which Drum said is higher than national and state averages, and all 141 mothers in the program initiated breastfeeding.

Drum also praised the department's work in developing partnerships that improved access to reproductive services in the county, along with updating and implementing protocols for sexually transmitted diseases.

The county was also credited with continuing to build support for tobacco-free environment policies, which Drum said is continuing the county's progress toward instituting a tobacco retail license policy.

When it came to the needed improvements, many have already been made, Drum said, and most were administrative or regarded data collection and storage.

One of the greater challenges facing the department, noted by the Oregon Health Authority, is problems in maintaining staff numbers, especially in monitoring the health and safety of the county's food, pools and lodging.

Drum said she's worked with Fiumara and the department has done its best at prioritizing its work despite the staffing challenges. Drum said the Oregon Health Authority has granted the county a six-month extension on portions of its review due to these challenges, and if the challenges persist, she'll work with Fiumara on the next step at that point.

While the review highlights more work needed to be done by Fiumara and his department, he was grateful for the feedback.

"We look forward to this review," Fiumara said to some chuckles from the commissioners and members of the audience. "I'm serious. It's our chance to see what we did wrong and where we need to improve."

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The Umatilla River flows swiftly through Pendleton near Trailhead Park on Wednesday afternoon. The National Weather service issued a flood warning for the headwaters of the Umatilla River near Gibbon on Wednesday morning.

National Weather Service issues flood watch

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — The National Weather Service has issued a flood watch in effect through Friday morning for streams and creeks in the foothills of the Blue Mountains and eastern slopes of the Washington Cascades.

Meteorologist Mary Wister said they were not expecting anything "major," but there could be some pastures flooded by the Umatilla River at or above the Gibbon area 20 miles east of Pendleton.

The warning issued Wednesday notes people should be cautious around streams and rivers and be on the lookout for fast currents, a rapid rise in water level, weak banks, cold water and ponding in fields. It also encourages people not to drive through flooding over roads.

Pendleton residents may be wary of flooding after McKay Creek flooded neighborhoods last year, but Wister said Wednesday afternoon that the McKay Creek Reservoir was only 37% full.

"There's still a lot of room left," she said.

While the weather has warmed up enough to turn to rain this week, Wister said people can expect a return to colder weather within a few days.

Council appoints a familiar face to Fairley's seat

Former city councilor Chuck Wood will fill term

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — During his initial campaign for Ward 2 in 2012, Chuck Wood got 733 votes to win a seat on the Pendleton City Council.

On Tuesday, Wood only needed seven votes to secure his second stint on the council.

The council unanimously selected Wood to fill the rest of the late Scott Fairley's term, choosing the former city councilor over Melissa Shumake, a planner for the city of Walla Walla, Washington.

In a public interview, Wood told the council that he worked hard during his single term on the council, but he was "burnt out" by the end of it in 2016.

Wood

He applied to rejoin the council under the encouragement of his wife, but he reiterated that he had no intention of running for a full term in May. Wood and his wife plan to sell their house over the summer, and they don't know whether they will stay in town after the house sells.

Wood leaned on his experience to make the case for his appointment.

Among his accomplishments, Wood listed his work to help establish an advisory committee for the Pendleton Development Commission and his role as the pivotal swing vote that eventually led to the city putting marijuana sales on the ballot, a measure that ultimately passed.

During her interview, Shumake said the council could benefit from a newcomer's perspective.

Shumake said she moved to town five years ago to live with her partner, and she's since joined the board for Pendleton Public Library.

As a councilor, Shumake said she could take some of the lessons she's learned in Walla Walla and bring them to Pendleton. Examples included Walla Walla's annual survey to gauge residents' concerns and keep them engaged.

Once the interviews concluded, several councilors thanked Shumake for her interest in the seat but they needed Wood's experience in what's expected to be a busy year.

Although Wood was sworn in and quickly joined the dais, the council left the door open to appointing Shumake later in the year.

Wood said he may sell his house as soon as this summer, and he would be amenable to stepping down from the council if a candidate wins the seat outright in the May 19 election.

Shumake is the only filed candidate for Ward 2, but more candidates can join up until the March 10 filing deadline.

None of the filed candidates — Shumake, Ward 1 candidate Kevin Martin, at-large Councilor Paul Chalmers, and Mayor John Turner — currently face opposition.

BRIEFLY

Hermiston market robbed Tuesday

HERMISTON — Hermiston police responded to a report of an armed robbery on Northwest 11th Street Tuesday night.

A male suspect wearing a face mask and a red American Eagle sweatshirt allegedly held an employee at gunpoint in the 11th Street Market before 10:30 p.m. He fled from the scene on foot with cash and remains at large. Law enforcement officials are not disclosing the amount that was taken.

The gun was never fired and no one was hurt in the incident, police said. The Hermiston Police Department is currently investigating the case.

"Historically, violent crime in Hermiston is relatively infrequent," said Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston. "When these types of events occur, it alarms us."

Manslaughter defendant denied bail reduction

UMATILLA COUNTY — A Hermiston woman charged with first-degree manslaughter and five other counts related to a fatal car crash in December 2019 was denied a bail reduction this week.

Attorney's for Michelle Fry, 45, requested the court consider a $50,000 reduction in bail to the minimum amount required for Measure 11 crimes like first-degree manslaughter. According to the motion issued on the topic, Fry said she believed her family could raise the $5,000 bail needed to be conditionally released in order to return to her job in Stanfield and spend time with her children and grandchildren.

The motion was denied on Monday.

Police arrested Fry in December after she was traveling northbound on Highway 395 and failed to stop at a red light at the intersection of East Punkin Center Road.

Fry was reportedly driving from the Hermiston-based Panda Inn restaurant when she crashed into a vehicle driven by Elidio Salas De La Paz, 77, of Hermiston.

His wife Alicia Salas, 75, also of Hermiston, was a passenger in the vehicle and died at the hospital. Fry was reportedly under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident.

The district attorney's office obtained medical records for Alicia Salas and Elidio Salas de La Paz in connection with the case.

City, county to begin work on McKay Creek

PENDLETON — Local agencies feel they're close to starting work on McKay Creek, a stream that flooded parts of southwest Pendleton last spring.

The city of Pendleton announced in a press release Tuesday that the city, Umatilla County, and the Lower McKay Creek Water Control District were close to securing a permit to work in the creek and expect to receive it the week of Feb. 10.

The press release states that work crews have already begun preliminary tasks, like building access roads and staging equipment.

Besides damaging homes and Community Park, the flood washed in sediment and rocks that diminished the creekbed's capacity.

In an attempt to make a future flood less likely, the city and its partners want to remove an estimated 800 truckloads of sediment between Quinney and Struve bridges.

The debris will be stockpiled at a site west of Community Park for potential reuse with the requirement that all work is done by March 31.

All parties are cooperating with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

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