

Inmates: ‘It’s just so good to have all these hands’

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On Wednesday, the crews started on opposite ends of the park and began working alongside city employees, other volunteers and residents in pulling and shoveling out mud, garbage and debris from the previously flooded homes.

“There weren’t a lot of questions asked,” Robertson said. “They just got right to work.”

While the Oregon Department of Corrections typically contracts its TRCI work crews out to government agencies and other community service projects in the region, the flood cleanup crews were donated to aid in the community’s recovery efforts.

Dusti Hunter, the prison’s institution work program coordinator, said the initial idea came from a prison staff member. After getting the green light from the state, Hunter came down to Pendleton on Tuesday to meet with Pendleton Parks and Recreation staff and get a look at the trailer park in order to



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Members of a Two Rivers Correctional Institution work crew help clear flood-damaged material from a home at the Riverview Mobile Home Estates in Pendleton on Wednesday.

a plan in place.

As they normally do for their labor on work crews, Hunter said the inmates will still receive minimal compensation in the form of credits that can be used for phone calls and items in the prison’s commissary.

Work crew programs gen-

erally are designed to provide inmates with learning opportunities and experience that they can use when they’ve been released, Hunter said, and this week’s cleanup crews are no different.

“They’re getting familiar with how to coordinate an

activity and work as a group to reach an outcome that looks like what they intended it to be,” she said.

In this instance, Hunter highlighted that the work crews will also benefit from seeing their hard work helping those who badly need it.

“They know that the state

is doing it for the community, and that makes them feel good,” Hunter said of the work crews. “Knowing that they’re providing some help that allows them to say, ‘I did that. I helped them.’”

Wednesday’s crew seemed to model that ideal.

“It’s a blessing just to be out here and able to help these people,” said TRCI inmate Michael Moore.

The devastation witnessed at Riverview was personal to some, too.

Prior to being incarcerated, Moore lived in Pendleton and said he had a friend who had been living in the trailer park. Moore’s mother told him earlier this week that the friend’s home had been damaged in the floods.

“They come from these communities, they’re a part of these communities,” Robertson said. “They want to give back to them.”

Homeowners in Riverview were happy for the help. Both Robertson, who supervised one crew, and Corrections Officer Sandra Post, who supervised the other, said the residents were not-

ing but receptive to the help.

“We’ve heard nothing negative so far,” Post said. “People are telling us how happy they are to see us and to have us here.”

Mark Holmquist, who works with Pendleton Public Works, spent Wednesday at Riverview contributing to the cleanup efforts. He’s seen firsthand that many of the park’s residents are elderly, have disabilities or had homes that were so severely damaged they’ll need help in order to recover.

“Many of these people have no means or ways to do this themselves,” he said. “It’s just so good to have all these hands.”

The crews of inmates worked under the sun Wednesday, as they helped clear the trailer park of the flood’s wreckage. Hunter said the plan is for crews to be back out in Pendleton on Thursday and Friday, with a few days at the start of next week likely, too.

“It’s been really good so far, it’s just a slow process,” Holmquist said. “There’s a lot to do.”

Revenue: ‘Now is the time to make responsible investments’

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an impending recession have been tempered somewhat as the trade war with China and lending markets have calmed, McMullen said.

But he cautioned that fallout from the coronavirus outbreak in China could have consequences for the state’s economy if it continues longer than expected. China is the world’s second-largest economy and the No. 1 market for Oregon exports.

McMullen also registered alarm at recent population estimates in Oregon, which have suggested the state is attracting fewer residents from out of state than predicted. That could hamper job growth, as companies cannot find employees.

“If we’re constrained by labor growth that’s a big deal,” McMullen said. “That cuts our job growth esti-

mates potentially by a quarter to a third.”

Economists are awaiting more solid numbers from the 2020 census before building the phenomenon into the state’s forecasting, McMullen said.

The updated revenue picture comes as the Legislature considers a wide range of spending proposals in its legislative short session. Big-ticket items demanding lawmakers’ attention include wildfire preparedness, homeless shelters and affordable housing.

The chairs of the Legislature’s Ways and Means Committee, which has a huge influence over where state dollars flow, have also been clear they’ll prioritize plugging structural funding holes in state agencies like the Oregon Health Authority and Department of Forestry while socking away money



AP Photo/Anna Reed, File

House Speaker Tina Kotek speaks on the first day of the short legislative session at the Oregon Capitol in Salem on Feb. 3, 2020. Kotek, D-Portland, called a new revenue forecast “welcome news,” and announced she’d press for more money for homelessness services than she initially planned.

against a possible recession. Prior to Wednesday’s forecast, that philosophy had lawmakers contemplating a roughly \$500 million pot for new spending this session.

As is typical, lawmakers wasted no time sending out statements reacting to the revenue picture.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, called

the forecast “welcome news,” and announced she’d press for more money for homelessness services than she initially planned.

“In the midst of a statewide housing crisis, I think it’s essential we direct some of our ending fund balance toward helping individuals and families experiencing homelessness get access to shelter,” Kotek said in a statement. “I will be increasing my request for one-time dollars for serving unsheltered Oregonians from \$40 million to \$60 million.”

Similarly, Gov. Kate Brown used the forecast to press again for her priorities of wildfire and earthquake preparedness.

“Now is the time to make responsible investments — in priorities like wildfire mitigation and preparedness, earthquake resiliency, and shelter space and services to

address homelessness — that will ensure future generations won’t have to shoulder the burdens of our inaction,” Brown said in a statement.

Republicans, meanwhile, continued to maintain that the state’s strong economic performance indicated Democrats should not have sought tax increases, such as a new tax on businesses passed last session to fund schools.

“We have nearly \$650 million more funds in the budget than expected,” Senate Minority Leader Herman Baertschiger Jr., R-Grants Pass, said in a statement. “Why did Democrats burden taxpayers with over \$1 billion in taxes with the gross receipts sales tax disguised as an education bill? The supermajority is determined to weaken our economy and will do everything they can to take taxpayer dollars to fund big government.”



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Crews from McLaughlin Landscaping help to clear debris from the Riverview Mobile Home Estates in Pendleton on Wednesday afternoon. The company has been donating equipment and labor to help with flood recovery efforts in the Riverside area.

Recovery: Salvation Army delivered hundreds of meals to the displaced

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try, and McLaughlin said it wants to continue what it’s doing.

“It’s just part of the company’s mission,” he said.

Arne Swanson, the owner of Arne’s Sewer and Septic Service, said the business typically donates port-a-potties during times of disaster, and Arne’s is providing them on a case-by-case for the floods.

The flood also means septic service is in high demand.

Swanson said the company’s service area stretches through much of Umatilla and Morrow counties, and many rural residents rely on septic systems instead of relying on a municipal sewer system.

While Pendleton, Echo, and Weston were all subject to heavy flooding, some of the hardest hit areas were outside incorporated cities.

While Arne’s is usually responding to about a dozen clients during a normal business period, Swanson said his company is now responding to as many as 250 customers who have seen their septic systems damaged by the flood.

The flooding has been severe enough that it has forced some people out of their houses, and some organizations are expanding their services to meet the needs of the temporarily homeless.

According to a press release, the Salvation Army has delivered hundreds of meals to people displaced by the flood and those working in flood recovery.

That’s in addition to dozens of vouchers the Salvation Army has distributed to displaced residents that allows them to buy gasoline for their vehicles and receive free clothes through the Salvation Army’s Pendleton thrift store.

Awards: Made to Thrive wins Merit of Honor

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“I’m speechless,” she said, wiping away tears as her family joined her on stage.

Presenter Bob Green, a fellow chamber ambassador, called Meyers a woman of integrity who was humble, resourceful, diligent, elegant, witty, thoughtful and many other traits that make her a role model. He highlighted her service in organizations, such as Altrusa International and the Agape House, as well as professional success as a vice president at Banner Bank.

“As a banker the past 37 years she has excelled as one of the most accomplished bankers in the area, in the words of her peers,” Green said.

The Bob Severson Rotary Business of the Year went to Medelez Inc., a family-owned, Hermiston-based trucking company. Presenter Tammy Smith said they started in the early 1980s with just three pieces of equipment, and today have more than 150 trucks and more than 300 employees. Their business provides support along Hermiston’s supply chain, from farms like AgriNorthwest to processing plants like Lamb Weston to retailers like Safeway. Beyond that, they have been major sponsors of projects, such as Kennison Field, and nonprofits, such as Farmers Ending Hunger.

As the Medelez brothers took the stage to accept the award, Benny Medelez thanked their employees and the community.

“We came here in 1974 because we thought Hermiston would be a good place to raise our families, and we



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Cindy Meyers reacts to winning the Woman of the Year Award at the 50th annual Distinguished Citizens Awards in Hermiston on Wednesday night.

were right,” he said.

The Merit of Honor Award went to Made to Thrive, a Hermiston nonprofit that helps at-risk youths participate in extracurricular activities. The organization pays fees, provides equipment and snacks, gives rides to practices, encourages parent involvement and sends mentors to cheer on students at their games and performances.

Made to Thrive was started by Kriss Dammeyer in 2014 and has since helped more than 1,500 children ages 4-18 in Umatilla County. Presenter Phil Hamm said Dammeyer isn’t afraid to highlight the “sad parts” of the community, but she always comes ready with a solution and the drive to make it happen.

“We have our heads down and just going, and sometimes we don’t take the time

to reflect on the impact we are making,” Dammeyer said as she accepted the award.

Besides the awards presented by the chamber, Umatilla County Fire District #1 also presented their Fire Service Award to Jessica Marcum, the district’s community paramedic who visits patients in their homes to help prevent future ambulance rides and emergency room visits.

“She has almost by herself grown the program to be one respected throughout the state,” Stanton said.

Hermiston School District’s Educators of the Year were also recognized at the dinner. They were Marian Koenig (Highland Hills Elementary), Shelly Lillie (Desert View Elementary), Holly Moss (Rocky Heights Elementary), Shawna Yeager (Sunset Elementary), Amy Springstead (West Park

Elementary), Melissa Purswell (Armand Larive Middle School), Daniel Allen (Sandstone Middle School), Tammy Fisher and Nicole Silver (Hermiston High School) and Pam Schaffeld in the district office.

Fisher was named the overall Educator of the Year, a choice superintendent Tricia Mooney said was a difficult one. However, she said Fisher’s “passionate, tireless efforts to engage all students in learning” had gained the admiration of all her colleagues.

Mooney was recognized as the district’s Administrator of the Year, and the district noted a long list of accomplishments in the past year, including completing a doctorate in education, being appointed to the Oregon Quality Education Commission and helping the district pass an \$82.7 million bond.