

Fields in bloom



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Sprinklers water a field in bloom along Highway 207 between Hermiston and Lexington on Tuesday afternoon.

Stranded in the Blue Mountains

Irrigon family finds country hospitality after getting stranded near Ukiah

By **ANDREW CUTLER**
East Oregonian

IRRIGON — Martin Montes De Oca and his family are like so many across the country. With the coronavirus prompting social distancing to become the norm, Martin, his wife, Celia, and son, Kristian, were looking to get outside last Saturday and enjoy some fresh air and perhaps find a morel mushroom or two when they took off for a drive up in the Blue Mountains.

The family left their home in Irrigon and took a path they knew well through Heppner and near the Cutsforth Park area, where they saw snow on the ground for the first time.

Martin pressed forward in the family’s Toyota all-wheel drive vehicle and began to climb.

“We were 2 miles past the snow line and going up the last uphill before going downhill into the Ukiah Valley,” he said. “We had used the road before during the summer, but we had to try to avoid these 20- or 30-foot-long ruts that would have high-centered us.”

As Montes De Oca’s car tried to navigate nearly 4 feet of snow, it began to get stuck and spin out on the warming snow that was turning to slush. Celia and Kristian tried pushing the car as Martin drove, but it proved to be a Sisyphean task.

The Montes De Ocas were stuck.

“It was about 10:45 a.m. and fortunately we had



Photo contributed by Martin Montes De Oca
Martin Montes De Oca and his wife, Celia, and son, Kristian, went for a drive last Saturday in the family’s Toyota all-wheel drive vehicle until the snow became impassable.

packed some food and water,” Martin said. “We ate and said some prayers and my wife finally said, ‘We need to leave because no one is coming through here.’”

Martin looked out the window and saw no other tracks, realizing it was time to take off with their energy at its peak. The family walked for an hour in knee-high snow that challenged Martin’s left leg and the replaced knee in it.

“We walked and walked and walked and I fell a few times, but my wife and son helped me up,” he said.

As they walked toward Ukiah and nearly reached the snow line, they saw a pickup that Kristian was able to flag down. The driver picked them up and drove them to a gas station in Ukiah.

With tow trucks more

than an hour away, Martin enlisted the help of Ukiah resident Ronald Eakin to try to get his car free from the deep snow.

“He went and got his friend who had a four-wheel drive diesel pickup with mountain tires,” Martin said. “We got a couple hundred yards into the snow line and his pickup wouldn’t go any farther. They wondered how we ever made it as far as we did without four-wheel drive.”

Eakin and his friend, Kenneth Cowger, were not satisfied just trying their best. The two took Martin back to the gas station to get his family before making them dinner. They even offered the Montes De Ocas a place to stay for the night.

“I called my son, Ivan, who lives in Hermiston, to come pick us up,” Martin

said, “I just want people to know there are still really good people out there.”

Eakin said helping motorists dig themselves out of the snow is a fairly common occurrence in Ukiah.

“This is the third one in less than a month,” he said.

The Montes De Ocas are now home safe and sound. As for the car, it has to wait until the snow melts, something Eakin said could be fairly soon.

“If we get the rain like we’re supposed to, probably in the next three or four days,” he said. “If not, maybe another week or week and a half.”

Eakin is making the drive from Ukiah to check on the vehicle as often as he can.

“There’s a lot of good people around Ukiah that will watch out for it,” he said.

City approves street repair projects for 2020

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — While the future of street funding is uncertain, the Pendleton City Council approved a new round of street repairs for 2020.

The council unanimously approved a \$595,595 bid from Central Washington Asphalt of Moses Lake, Washington, beating out bids by Granite Construction Co. of Hermiston, Humbert Asphalt of Milton-Freewater and Pioneer Construction of Pendleton, which submitted an incomplete bid.

Central Washington Asphalt will use the money to overlay five blocks of neighborhood streets, seven blocks of busier “collector/arterial” streets and a reconstruction of more than two blocks of commercial streets.

The staff report didn’t include the exact streets the city would repair, but City Engineer Tim Simons said they would soon be posted on the internet and residents and businesses would be notified when the work was about to take place.

The winning bid came in well below the city’s estimate, a fact staff is attributing to Central Washington Asphalt already working on a runway pavement project for the city and the falling price of oil.

Simons said the COVID-19 shutdown could cause a drop in state gas tax revenue, a key source of income for street repair in the city.

But for now, the city will try to take advantage of the low cost of pavement repair by potentially adding more projects that fit within its budget.

Perhaps the most contentious issue of the night was

a unanimous vote to buy an excavator and trailer for the water department for \$101,631.

To kick off the discussion, Mayor John Turner read a letter from Shane Palm of Farm Equipment Headquarters in Pendleton. According to Turner, Palm was disappointed that the city didn’t try to solicit local businesses before selecting a bid from a Pasco vendor.

Instead of a traditional bidding process, the city used a cooperative purchasing agreement, where the city came up with the specifications for the needed equipment, and then used a third-party service called Sourcewell to identify a bidder.

Some of the councilors felt the city wasn’t doing the bidding process correctly or staff should have led the process themselves, which eventually earned a

response from Public Works Director Bob Patterson.

“We have the ability in the future to take what we get in pricing from Sourcewell, and contact the local dealers and say, ‘Can you beat this or match it?’” he said. “We can make that level of reach. I will guarantee you that they will not be able to match the Sourcewell price. We know that. You don’t. In the future, we will make that extra effort and bring that back to you.”

Before the council meeting, members met at the Pendleton Development Commission, where they agreed to up the local match for the Vert Auditorium stairway repair project. The extra money will go to adding heating coils to the stairs that lead to the front entrance, which is expected to keep ice and snow from collecting during the cold weather months.

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