

Hermiston utility rates set to increase by 2.15%

The increase is an automatic update tied to inflation

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Water and sewer rates will increase by 2.15% for Hermiston residents starting in March.

The increase is an automatic update tied to inflation. When the city council passed a water and sewer rate restructure in 2018, the restructure included a significant increase for most customers at the time, with larger water users paying higher rates. The 2018 ordinance also included a provision that, starting in March 2020, rates would automatically increase yearly based on the Engineering News-Record Construction Cost Index as of December of the preceding calendar year.

Last year, the index rose by 2.15%.

According to a memo in the agenda packet for



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Wastewater churns in the aeration basin before being sent through a filter to remove organic matter at the Hermiston Wastewater Treatment facility in Hermiston. Water and sewer rates will increase by 2.15% for Hermiston residents starting in March.

the Monday, Feb. 22, city council meeting, the average water user's combined water and sewer bill would increase by about \$3.06 in August (the highest usage month of the year) and \$1.73 in

January (the lowest).

Mayor David Drotzmann said the council had been in an uncomfortable position in past years of raising rates by a large amount at a time after years of no increases. Now, he

said, the smaller increases by inflation should help keep up with rising construction costs for continued maintenance of the city's water system.

"Now we've put a pathway and plan in place that it grows

with the community, and it grows with the plan, and it's not something where we have to come out and ask for a 15% increase every few years," he said.

Water and sewer revenue pay for maintaining the city's water and sewer infrastructure to prevent leaks and other failures. Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan presented an upgrade to the city's capital improvement plan, which lays out the water, sewer and street projects the city plans to accomplish over the next five years.

The plan was first adopted in 2019 and will be updated every two years. Morgan said based on guidance from the capital improvement plan, the city accomplished 14 road, sewer and water projects totaling \$2.7 million over the past two years, ranging from repaving 11 blocks of Hermiston Avenue to replacing one-half mile of 1920s-era water mains.

Water and sewer projects scheduled for the next five

years include replacing a 40-year-old booster station, four lift stations, 3 miles of aging water lines, and the membrane that filters water at the recycled water treatment plant. On the street side, the city plans to realign the intersection of Geer, Harper and River roads and use funding from the Oregon Legislature to rebuild North First Place between Hermiston and Elm avenues. The total cost of capital projects planned for the next five years is just over \$20 million.

Councilor Maria Duron said when rates went up in 2018, she was one who didn't understand why they went up so much, but she appreciated that city staff have put out so much information online to lay out exactly how the money will be used.

"Thank you for making it so clear," she said. "I was reading through it, like, 'OK, now I get it, now I understand,' so putting it out there for people to have access to the information is so laudable."

Welcome back, students



Sherwood Elementary School Assistant Tammy Hillmick, dressed as Scooby Doo, welcomes students back on Monday, Feb. 22. Hillmick made sure students were comfortable getting off the bus to prepare for their first day back to school.

Contributed Photo

LOCAL BRIEFING

Hermiston plans airport upgrade

HERMISTON — A planned \$2 million improvement project at the Hermiston Municipal Airport will mostly be covered by state and federal grant funds.

The airport reconstruction project, scheduled for the summer of 2021, will improve the apron where aircraft park while loading and unloading cargo or refueling.

According to a news release, the Federal Aviation Administration will provide 90% of the funds for the project, and requires a 10% match.

The city of Hermiston announced last week that the Oregon Department of Aviation awarded the city

\$150,000 for the project, which will cover 75% of the city's required local match to the FAA funds.

The city had previously been planning on using the \$69,000 in CARES Act federal stimulus funding the airport received in spring 2020 to cover the local match.

Now, the news release from the city stated, those CARES Act funds can be used to add a 2-inch overlay of new pavement on Airport Way, which is the only road leading to the airport.

According to the news release, while the airport has mostly served recreational aircraft, agricultural businesses and corporate jet traffic, it has more recently seen an increase in cargo shipping through compa-

nies, such as UPS, with two to three flights per day bringing in packages.

Umatilla County reports one new COVID-19 death

PENDLETON — Umatilla County Public Health announced one new COVID-19-related death on Tuesday, Feb. 23, according to a press release.

Umatilla County's 81st death with COVID-19 is a 63-year-old female who tested positive on Dec. 17, 2020, and died on Jan. 2 at her residence in Umatilla County, according to the press release. The individual had underlying medical conditions.

— EO Media Group

Remembering the last 'big one'

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
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UMATILLA COUNTY — As longtime Umatilla County residents surveyed the rushing waters of the county's flood of 2020, it brought to mind another scene, from 1996.

The county marked the 25th anniversary of the flood of 1996 — generally considered the last "big one" before 2020 — on Feb. 9.

When an *East Oregonian* reporter found Hermiston Irrigation District Manager Annette Kirkpatrick surveying where flood waters had overtopped the district's gates along the Umatilla River during the 2020 flood, she immediately made the comparison.

"Even '96 wasn't as bad as this," she said at the time, echoing the thoughts of others interviewed that day.

The numbers bear out that, at least in terms of water height, the 2020 flood was worse. In 1996, the *Hermiston Herald* reported that water in the Umatilla River had been clocked at 16,000 cubic feet per second in Pendleton on the day of the flooding, compared with less than 700 earlier that week.

In 2020, water levels reached more than 20,000 cfs at their peak.

According to a National Weather Service report, the 1996 flood was caused by a convergence of weather patterns. The preceding fall and that winter had seen precipitation in the Pacific Northwest at 125% above normal, according to the weather service, with "tremendous amounts of snow" falling in a short period of time in late January, followed up by a deep freeze.

"The weather pattern changed dramatically in early February, with a strong subtropical jet (pineapple express) bringing warm, moist air to the region, which resulted in very heavy rain and rapid snowmelt," the NWS website states.



East Oregonian, File

Jeff Swanson wades from his home with belongings in the floodwaters of the Umatilla River near Cayuse on Feb. 8, 1996.

The result was severe flooding across the Pacific Northwest, resulting in eight deaths, mostly in Western Oregon. Property damage estimates given at the time ranged from \$500 million to \$1 billion, and *The Oregonian* reported 21,843 people were evacuated from their homes.

In Umatilla County, many of the same areas that flooded in 2020 were also underwater in 1996. The Feb. 13, 1996, edition of the *Hermiston Herald* led with a front page photo of Umatilla School District's athletic complex underwater — described in the article as "knee deep," while in 2020 the water there reached 4 feet.

On the east side of the county, Tom Groat, public affairs manager for the Umatilla County Emergency Management Office in 1996, reported that 24 people had to be rescued by helicopter from the flood waters, and there was "quite a bit of damage" to roads stretching from Reith to Echo. The *East Oregonian*

mentioned about 30 residents were busy piling sandbags at River View Mobile Estates as the waters crept higher. Homes along the north fork of McKay Creek had flooded, the paper reported, and areas of the Umatilla Indian Reservation were underwater.

"A portion of Cayuse Road lost one lane to the Umatilla River above Homly, and in other areas it had eroded to within three feet of the yellow line," the paper reported. "The Thornhollow-Gibbon area remains closed to traffic because of deep water over the road."

Coverage of the time compared the event to the last major flood in the state, which took place about 31 years earlier in December 1964 and January 1965, and set peak flow records at the time. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reported those floods caused more than \$1.8 million in damages at the time and "heavily" flooded Umatilla County communities, including Adams and Echo.

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