



Phil Wright/The Observer

Locals socialize Saturday, March 20, 2021, at the open house of the North Powder Rural Fire Protection District's new station. The former facility could not house the district's big equipment. That is no longer a problem.

New fire station fulfills big needs

\$1M project provides ample space for North Powder's fire department

By PHIL WRIGHT
La Grande Observer

NORTH POWDER — The North Powder Rural Fire Protection District welcomed the first day of spring, Saturday, March 20, with an open house of its new fire station. Dozens of people attended the event, which included free hamburgers, sodas and deserts, and liked what they saw.

"This is nice" became a common refrain.

The new two-story building stands on 2 acres at 710 E St., North Powder, about 600 yards from the previous station's site. The most eye-catching elements inside are barn wood wainscoting

that adds a rustic touch to the decor and the large sliding door between the big apparatus bay and the conference room, turnout space and more. There also is a second-floor overlooking the bay that provides recreation space.

Fire Chief Colby Thompson and Assistant Chief Casey Martin were stoked about the new digs. The project to build this fire station began in 2017, they said, out of sheer necessity.

"We literally did not have room in the old structure," Martin said.

Holding meetings and trainings was a challenge, Martin said, because the quarters were so cramped and the vehicles inside the old building left little room for firefighters to hustle and get into protective gear.

The former building also was too small to house the department's big equipment, including its bulldozer and 5,000-gallon tank water truck. That and other equip-

ment remained outside. The crew had to drain the tank each winter, Martin said, to protect hoses and pumps, and having the heavy equipment outside meant they could have been targets for vandalism.

While that never materialized, he said, it was a constant concern.

But the new building provides 11,500 square feet of space, Thompson said, about four times as much as the former and has wide bay doors to accommodate the big equipment. The dozer and water truck both were on display inside the new station.

"That tank truck right now is full," Martin pointed out. "So there's 5,000 gallons of water ready to go."

The all-volunteer department consists of 20 locals, serves an area of 172 square miles and receives funding for operations from its taxing district. The project for the new building cost a little more than \$1 million.

The department paid a good chunk of that with its own building fund, Thompson said, which it added to for a number of years. Grants from local and regional organizations also helped cover the tab, as did donations from numerous businesses and locals. Martin stressed this was key to the money end of the project.

"That was a big part of the process with trying not to increase the tax rate for the district," he said.

A general contractor oversaw the construction of the building, and the department's own members shouldered their share of work, including installing interior walls. Martin said the children of firefighters chipped in, often with clean up.

"They've really been a big part of this also," he said, adding that getting youth involved has the benefit of piquing interest in the next generation of firefighters for the North Powder Rural Fire Protection District.

Constitutional law expert to help in redistricting case

By HILLARY BORRUD
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon Secretary of State Shemia Fagan has taken the unusual step of hiring an experienced lawyer with constitutional law expertise to help her win a court battle with legislative leaders over deadlines, data sets and powers to redraw legislative districts.

P.K. Runkles-Pearson was a partner at long-established Portland firm Miller Nash Graham & Dunn before she was hired as the secretary of state's in-house general counsel in February, according to her LinkedIn profile. Runkles-Pearson has expertise in state and federal constitutional law, according to her former employer's website.

None of the prior three secretaries of state had a general counsel. Instead, they relied on the Oregon attorney general to represent them and could get input from other staffers who were lawyers. The attorney general supervises Runkles-Pearson's work and Runkles-Pearson has been appointed as a special assistant attorney general for work on the redistricting case, a spokesperson for Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum noted.

Runkles-Pearson's annual salary is \$165,936, according to the secretary of state's Public Information Officer Aaron Fiedler. He did not directly answer a question about why Fagan chose to hire an in-house attorney to work on redistricting, rather than paying the Department of Justice to do the work, as is the norm.

Now that Runkles-Pearson has been hired, Fagan's administration is working on figuring out what legal issues in addition to redistricting the general

counsel might tackle. "P.K. Runkles-Pearson was hired as the general counsel for the entire agency and has been working with all seven agency divisions to assess and serve their general counsel needs," Fiedler wrote in an email. "Included in agency needs are redistricting issues, in consultation with the Oregon Department of Justice."

Redistricting in Oregon

Redrawing Oregon's legislative districts normally falls to the Oregon Legislature, and the state constitution requires the body to finish that work by July 1. That is usually not a problem, as federal law requires the U.S. Census Bureau to provide states with the necessary population data by April 1, and that has happened decade after decade. Only if the Legislature fails to agree on how to redraw state House and Senate district lines by the July 1 deadline does that task fall to the secretary of state. Under the state constitution, that officer has until Aug. 15 to complete the task.

But the pandemic and other factors complicated the collection of the once-a-decade tally of the U.S. population in 2020. As a result, the Census Bureau has said it cannot get the required population data to Oregon until Sept. 30.

The secretary of state's role is among the key issues at stake in the Legislature and secretary's dispute over how Oregon should handle the conflict between the state's constitutional redistricting deadlines and pandemic-delayed timeline to receive census data. So are the questions of how well the districts will reflect the state's current population and potential disruption to 2022 elections.

Federal relief bill provides \$4.3B

By HILLARY BORRUD
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon cities, counties and state government are set to receive a combined \$4.3 billion from the \$1.9 trillion aid package Congress passed earlier this month.

The largest chunk, \$2.6 billion, will go to the state to spend on Oregon's response to the pandemic or other uses. Budget analysts are working to pin down the level of flexibility the state has to spend the funds.

Oregon will also receive \$155 million for the state government to spend on capital projects, and county, city and other local governments are slated to receive a total of \$1.5 billion, according to information from U.S. Senate Democrats.

That is on top of the \$1.1 billion the federal relief law will send to Oregon schools.

Spending options

As for how the state government could spend its share, a spokesperson for Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said the options include paying for the government's response to the pandemic and providing premium pay to essential workers.

"Offsetting lost revenues to provide essential government services" is another option, Hank Stern wrote in an email, as is paying for water, sewer and broadband infrastructure.

Oregon's tax revenues have continued to exceed economists' expectations during the pandemic and ensuing recession, so much so that they are on track to trigger the state's one-of-a-kind "kicker" tax rebate, which would send some of the windfall back to taxpayers as credits when they file taxes in 2022.

Economists and state budget analysts have predicted a more challenging fiscal picture for the 2021-23 biennium, which begins July 1.

Lawmakers must pass that budget by the end of June.

Even before the Oregon Legislature approved \$800 million in additional spending in a December 2020 special session, analysts expected state revenues would be approximately \$800 million short of what would be needed to maintain the current level of services. Staff at the Legislative Fiscal Office expect the cost of providing a status quo level of services to rise from \$24 billion in the current two-year budget, to \$25.6 billion in 2021-23.

As improving revenue forecasts erase some of the state's anticipated shortfall, that could leave more of the federal aid up-for-grabs as lawmakers draft the next budget. Interim Legislative Fiscal Officer Laurie Byerly said states are still waiting for guidance from the Department of Treasury, so it is

unclear the degree of flexibility the state will have to spend the funds.

Oregon governments also received \$1.8 billion for a variety of specific uses, including to distribute for rental assistance and \$499 million for schools, through Congress' December relief bill and \$2.45 billion from the CARES Act earlier in 2020.

Unlike the cash payments that can land in people's bank accounts fairly quickly, federal aid that flows to governments can take months to make its way to specific programs or recipients.

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