

Fire station: 'We're not trying to make the Taj Mahal, we just want to make it plain and simple'

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land to build it, a "shovel ready" parcel by the intersection of Bannister Road and Mill Street.

They also have a design, which they modified slightly from Heppner's fire station. It includes a handful of offices, a kitchen, storage space, a few dorms for firefighters visiting from the Oregon Department of Forestry and other partners, and parking for about eight rigs.

"We're not trying to make the Taj Mahal," Baty said. "We just want to make it plain and simple."

The district's current station is a hodgepodge building, the oldest section of which is now a century old. In one part, old jail cells hold storage items.

Baty says it feels embarrassing to show people around the station, given some of the accommodations. Firefighters don't have real lockers to store their gear in, for example. Instead, they line them up in their designated section of a wall alcove directly behind a truck parking area. Baty has tried to protect the gear from the diesel fumes as much as possible by hanging clear plastic sheets in front of them.

One of the biggest problems with the current building is its location on a steep hill. One of the bays is extremely difficult to back into, Baty said, showing where a fire truck has to line up just right in order to twist around a sharp, banked turn. A bent railing in one spot and some scraped-up areas on the pole between garage doors bear testament to how difficult getting rigs into the station can be — particularly when it's icy. It's also bad for the trucks.

"It twists the chassis," he said.

One thing Baty is proud of is the people serving the district. Baty is the district's only paid firefighter (the district also pays someone to do maintenance) and after a decades-long career working with paid firefighters, he said it has been extremely humbling to come to Weston and work alongside a crew of volunteers.

Hansell said it was Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer who first introduced him to Baty about a year ago. He toured the fire station in Weston later, as did Levy. At the time, Hansell planned to back the fire station as a project in the capital construction bill, but then the American Rescue Plan allocation came



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
East Umatilla Fire & Rescue Fire Chief David Baty indicates a parcel of land owned by the fire district while explaining the district's intent to build a new station on Wednesday, May 5, 2021.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Plastic sheeting hangs over turnouts and other fire gear in an effort to protect it from diesel exhaust at the current East Umatilla Fire & Rescue station in Weston on Wednesday, May 5, 2021.

up suddenly.

Hansell decided to dedicate all but \$100,000 of his \$4 million to the fire district, and Levy said she would dedicate half of her \$2 million. The county volunteered to have its public works department do the labor for free for some needed road improvements, pushing the project to its \$5.6 million estimated cost.

"I was thinking this money is like a bird in the hand, that I get to give out, and why not give it to a project I'm already committed to?" Hansell said.

He said he was impressed by the need for the project, but of course, there are many great projects in need of funding in his district.

But one of the draws of the fire station was that Hansell wanted to give the money to a capital project that was shovel ready and could be completed with the just the ARP funds, instead of needing to spend time raising more money through other means.

It would also serve a very large area of his district, given the fire district's size, including Hansell's own hometown of Athena. And it fits in with the priorities of leadership in the Senate right now to bolster fire suppression and prevention, after Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod lost his own home to the wildfires in Southern Oregon last summer.

"This was the complete package," Hansell said.

The money from the ARP will also come to the fire district in October, while the district would have to wait two years to receive funds if it were included in the capital construction bill.

Hansell plans to give the other \$100,000 from the ARP funds to a wheat lab project at the Oregon State University experiment station in Adams. He is still lobbying for other other local projects to be included in this session's capital construction bill, including the Umatilla County Jail renovation, Blue Mountain Community College's Farm II project and the Wallowa Lake dam.

BMCC: Classes to start with masks and distancing

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in Southeast Washington, colleges and universities are making decisions of their own.

The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* reported Whitman College is requiring vaccinations, while Walla Walla Community College and Walla Walla University are not. Washington State University's recent decision to require vaccines for in-person classes means its Tri-Cities campus will have the same policy.

Green said the decision by Oregon's various four-year schools could inform how their surrounding community colleges make their own policies. But for now, BMCC is making plans to start classes with masks and social distancing as the main safeguards.

The COVID-19 pandemic made a huge dent in enrollment after BMCC mostly shut down campus activities last spring, exacerbating a downward trend that the college had been struggling with for several years.

Green said the potential effect of the college's vaccination policy is unknown: while it could allow BMCC to be more inclusive in



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton on Monday, May 10, 2021. While its decision isn't final, BMCC is planning to reopen in the fall without requiring students to get their vaccinations.

welcoming back students to campus, she added that some students might be uncomfortable returning to classrooms where they could be exposed to unvaccinated peers.

Requirements or not, Green said BMCC continues to encourage all students and staff to get their vaccines, pointing to the college's work in promoting a recent vac-

ination drive sponsored by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

The COVID-19 vaccine is available to all adults in Oregon.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File
COVID-19 testing clinic staff instruct drivers on testing procedures during a drive-thru COVID-19 testing event at the Pendleton Convention Center on Feb. 8, 2021.

COVID:

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needed to keep cases from rebounding sharply.

The official announcement on any changes in risk levels — and restrictions in each county — will not be announced by Gov. Kate Brown until May 11.

But some of the numbers showed clear indicators of what to expect.

Overall, they show a slight decline in COVID-19 cases over the past two weeks, compared to last week's report.

The state reported 10,755 new cases over the two-week period, which equals 252 cases per 100,000 residents. Both are slight declines over the previous period.

The rate of positive cases remains at 6.4% — state officials say anything above 5% has the potential to lead to a rebound of cases.

Several counties had case rates that would in the past have pushed them into the extreme risk category. For large counties, an infection rate of more than 200 per 100,000 people would place them in the most restrictive of the state's four risk level tiers.

But Brown introduced a new metric last month that keeps counties from the harshest limits, including a ban on indoor dining.

Counties will not be put in the extreme risk level regardless of their own COVID-19 numbers if the state overall has under 300 hospitalizations for COVID-19. After that

threshold is crossed, an increase of 15% has to be met to hit the extreme risk level.

As of May 10, the Oregon Health Authority reported 324 confirmed COVID-19 hospitalizations in the state, a slight reduction over the last period.

Under the rules, those numbers mean no counties will be put in extreme risk level when the new limits are announced May 11 and go into effect Friday, May 14.

The new numbers show Central Oregon has among the highest levels of infection and rates. Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties are well above the 200 infections per 100,000 mark. But because of the statewide metric requirement, they will almost certainly stay in the high risk limit level, the second more restrictive of the state's four tiers.

Deschutes County reported 1,069 COVID-19 cases over the past two weeks, with the cases per 10,000 rising to 542.6. Also up is the positive test rate, which at 9% is seen by health officials as a figure that could lead to future exponential growth of cases.

Crook County reported 546 cases per 100,000, a slight increase. But its test positivity rate fell to 8.6% from 9%. While still high, the rate is trending in the right direction.

Jefferson County also saw its rate per 100,000 rise to 315.3 cases per 100,000, but its positive test rate fell to 8.5% from 8.9%.

Leader:

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gave them a loan when they were struggling financially.

"There was so much I learned about my dad after he passed away, that I had no idea because I went off to college and left," she said.

According to Wyant and the resolution, Fenton was born in 1931 in Harper and graduated from high school in Ontario. He lost both his parents by the age of 14 and worked hard from a young age, doing everything from shining shoes to digging graves.

He attended one term at University of Oregon before being drafted into the Korean War, serving in the Army, mostly in France, for about two years. Afterward, he used his GI Bill benefits to go to what is now Eastern Oregon University. He met his wife, Joyce Kroenli, who was also majoring in education at the college.

They both taught school in Halfway until moving to Umatilla in 1978 after Fenton was hired as principal of the high school and junior high. He eventually became superintendent, from 1978 to 1996, and after retirement Fenton served on the Umatilla City Council from 1997 to 2015.

Wyant said before and after his retirement, her father was heavily involved in the surrounding communities, through the VFW, First United Methodist Church, Elks Club, Lions Club, Kiwanis Club and other organizations. He was also known

as a snappy dresser, she said, who used to have contests with other men at church about who could dress the best.

"You didn't see him without a suit and tie very often," she said.

Wyant, who still lives in Umatilla today, ended up going into education and was hired by her father to teach in Umatilla six years before his retirement. Her sister also eventually became a teacher, although neither had originally planned to follow in their parents' footsteps.

"Mom would come home and tell stories and I would say, 'I never want to do that!'" Wyant said.

Her family set up a scholarship at Eastern Oregon University in memory of Fenton.

Wyant's son, Jacob Vandever, works for Rep. Christine Drazen, R-Canby, who introduced the resolution.

"Strong communities are the backbone of our society and strong leaders are built by leaders like George Fenton Jr.," Drazen told representatives before the vote.

Reps. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, and Bobby Levy, R-Echo, both testified in favor of the resolution as well, sharing their memories of Fenton. Smith said Fenton will go down in history as a "statesman, a visionary and a leader of Umatilla." Levy said she went to church with Fenton for a time, and she appreciated the advice and encouragement he gave her before she got married and his kind note of condolence he sent her when her ex-husband died.