

# Hermiston home manufacturer sued for alleged civil rights violations

State records show Marlette Homes denied similar allegations earlier this year, while admitting to racial slurs appearing in company bathrooms

By EMILY CURETON  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

HERMISTON — Two former employees of a Hermiston home manufacturing company claim they endured years of anti-Black racism, discrimination and, in one woman's case, sexual harassment, only to be fired after reporting the incidents to managers, according to a lawsuit filed in federal court this week.

The complaint comes from two Black women who worked for Marlette Homes between 2018 and 2020. The company also does business as Clayton Hermiston, and is registered as CMH Manufacturing West, Inc., part of billionaire Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, which controls a manufactured home empire, and has itself faced criticism in 2015 for allegedly exploiting people of color through predatory lending practices.

Twin sisters Lisa Williams and Angela Pierce, both 55, accuse the company's Hermiston branch of a hostile work environment, sexual harassment, race-based discrimination, wrongful termination

and whistleblower retaliation. "Ms. Williams and Ms. Pierce heard and saw (the n-word) used in their environment, saw swastika symbols in the bathroom of Defendant, and were subject to physical assault and other dangers," according to the complaint.

"We have no comment at this time," Marlette Homes Human Resources Manager Erinn Gailey-Genack said when reached by phone Wednesday, July 21.

The Tennessee-based corporate office for CMH Manufacturing did not respond to requests for comment.

State records show the company denied similar allegations of illegal conduct earlier this year, while admitting to racial slurs appearing in company bathrooms.

The lawsuit describes times when Pierce and Williams were the only Black employees, "and this seemed specifically targeted at them." Since 2017, the company has reported hiring six employees who self-identified as Black or African American.

Last year, the sisters sent complaints to Oregon's Bureau of Labor and Indus-



East Oregonian, File

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tries. In its response, Clayton Hermiston agreed Pierce reported offensive language written in the bathrooms to management.

"Each time this has occurred, (Clayton Hermiston) has fully investigated the incident and took steps to prevent future occurrences, including by restricting access to Sharpie markers," attorney Krishna Balasubramani wrote to BOLI investigators, adding the company "has never been able to identify who wrote the offensive

racial slur on the wall or even determine whether it was an employee or a visitor that did so."

The sisters claim the bathrooms were repeatedly defaced with swastikas and the n-word. At the time, Pierce was a janitor who cleaned these spaces. Williams worked on finishing the mobile homes and cleaning them. The complaint alleges Williams was subjected to an excessive workload and sexual harassment by a coworker. The lawsuit names

individual supervisors for allegedly aiding and abetting the behavior.

According to attorney Meredith Holley, Williams wrote a letter in August addressed to Warren Buffett himself, asking for help.

"Due to my legitimate complaints ... I have been retaliated against through bogus and untrue disciplinary write ups," reads a copy of the Aug. 8 letter provided by Holley.

Three weeks later, Williams was written up

again. The document, also provided by her attorney, barred her from continuing to discuss "this or any prior incidents, curse, or otherwise disrupt your team in any way."

"You will also not send any more letters or complaints to Home Office unless it (sic) a new or different issue."

Williams refused to sign the formal reprimand. She was fired 10 days later.

In its response to the BOLI complaint, Clayton Homes denied reprimanding Williams for contacting the corporate office. It asserts she was terminated "for legitimate, non-discriminatory reasons."

Clayton Hermiston told state investigators that Pierce was fired for "hostility and aggressive, insubordinate behavior." Pierce alleged she was terminated for intervening in a meeting to support her sister in making discrimination claims.

Last month, the state labor agency suspended its investigation without reaching a determination because the women withdrew the complaints to pursue a federal lawsuit.

Clayton Hermiston has reported having about 190 employees. Nationwide, Clayton Homes' building affiliates employ more than 12,000 people, according to the company's website.

# County approves contact tracers, COVID-19 billboards

PENDLETON — The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners on Wednesday, July 21, approved payments for COVID-19-related billboards and contact tracers.

Joe Fiumara, the county's public health director, requested the county extend its contract and fund four billboards that for months have included COVID-19 and vaccine messaging. The commissioners unanimously approved the payment of \$25,440 for the billboards to stand for another year.

In addition, the commissioners approved the health department's request to employ its seven contact tracers permanently.

The contact tracers have worked in the county since May 2020. The health department has enough funding from the Oregon Health Authority to finance the positions through summer of 2022, Fiumara said. The commissioner approved the request unanimously.

The meeting then moved on to local community grants and payables. The commissioners approved \$35,000 in federal stimulus funds for a city park in Adams and \$75,000 for flood control in Echo.

"These will help communities in most incredible ways," Commissioner Dan Dorran said.

Commissioner George

Murdock noted residents and infrastructure in Echo have been in "desperate" need of support after the 2020 flooding event. Dorran said they are more than desperate.

"There are property owners losing ground right now without the engineering to support the permits," he said, adding the funding will assist 61 ranchers and 131 land owners.

"This is critical to not just one or two people," Dorran said.

And at the top of the meeting, the Umatilla County Public Health Department received recognition for its service during the COVID-19 pandemic from the Pendleton Honor Task Force.

Susan Bower, president

of Eastern Oregon Business Source and Umatilla County commissioner candidate, represented the organization that on occasion has called attention to honor local individuals or groups. The health department had at least 16 personnel present at the meeting.

Bower said the team at the health department had done an "absolutely outstanding job" during the past year and a half.

Murdock added his praise to the department.

"I certainly will be happy when COVID is in our rearview mirror," he said. "But I will say, if there's one positive upside, it has been a new spotlight on public health. It's been an afterthought by

the state of Oregon. Now, I don't think it will ever be again."

In all, Umatilla County has reported 9,079 COVID-19 cases since the pandemic began — more than 11% of its population — and the second-highest case rate among counties in Oregon, according to the OHA. The county continues to report infection rates higher than densely populated urban areas of Western Oregon.

Less than 40% of Umatilla County residents have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The county's vaccination rate ranks sixth lowest in Oregon, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

## OTHER BUSINESS

During its Wednesday, July 21, meeting, the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners approved several other items, including the following:

- An updated emergency plan that Tom Roberts, the county's emergency manager, presented.
- A maintenance request for retiling the first-floor bathroom in the Umatilla County Courthouse.
- A maintenance payable for the chiller in the Stafford Hansell Government Center.
- A payment for the county's dispatch software.

# Irrigon gets a new, safer path

By NICK ROSENBERGER  
East Oregonian

IRRIGON — Irrigon residents, parents and students can expect a safer method for arriving at school with the construction of a new multi-use pathway along the west side of Division Street from Highway 730 to Southeast Wyoming Avenue. The city is aiming to complete it before the start of the school year.

According to the Irrigon Public Works Department, the Division Street project will provide a "clear and safe area for bicyclists and pedestrians, a needed safe zone especially for children going to and from school."

Division Street previously had no sidewalk or path for pedestrians or students going to school, with cars driving past a couple of feet away.

"Kids would ride their bikes down the middle of Division," said Aaron Palmquist, Irrigon's city manager.

The street was a safety issue and dangerous, said Palmquist, noting a child had been killed in a motorcycle accident several years prior.

A path like the one under construction has "been needed for years," he said.

Palmquist said he has been working on implementing some sort of path since 2013, when he became city manager, but it had been a challenge to secure funding for the project. Finally, in July 2015, the city made an official application to the Oregon Department of

Transportation for Statewide Transportation Improvement Program funding. The funding became available in the 2018-21 biennium and they started construction this year.

Palmquist said the path was about safety and a "very strong community need and desire."

The 10-foot-wide multi-use path, with a price tag of about \$1.2 million to \$1.4 million, will allow walkers and cyclists a safer opportunity to travel between 730 to Southeast Wyoming and tie into their "safe school route."

Along with the addition of a flashing beacon on Division Street and barriers that separate the road from the path, the city recently added 12 street lights that light up the road and intersection. Previously, "It used to be dark all the way," Palmquist said.

Additionally, Palmquist hinted at another project going up to bid in November that will go from First Street through 14th Street and connect with the Division Street pathway.

While it's likely more than 30 students made the trek during the school day without the pathway, Palmquist said, many parents were afraid to have their children walk the dangerous road. He said there has been much excitement from parents and kids for the pathway and he expects the number of pedestrians and students walking to school will increase.

"It's exciting to finally see it come to pass," Palmquist said.

# Washington, Oregon to discuss Columbia River policy July 28



Steve Ringman/Seattle Times, File

**Lower Monumental Dam on the Snake River.**

*The Centralia Chronicle*

RICHLAND — Members of the Washington and Oregon fish and wildlife commissions will hold a virtual meeting next week to discuss policy for the shared waters of the Columbia River.

Four members of the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission and three members of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission will meet Wednesday, July 28, from 2-5:30 p.m.

Commission members

will discuss draft language for shared conservation goals and management policies in the Columbia River and receive updates from staff with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife about the impacts of different commercial and recreational fishing gears, as well as changes in fishing pressure over the past decade.

The meeting will be held via Zoom webinar. The public can tune in

to the meeting at zoom.us/j/95834364815. Participants also can call in to the meeting at 253-215-8782 or 888-475-4499, then enter the webinar ID: 958-3436-4815.

No decisions are expected at this meeting, and no public comment will be taken.

To view the full agenda and for more information about the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission, visit [wdfw.wa.gov/about/commission](http://wdfw.wa.gov/about/commission).

For more information about the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission, visit [dfw.state.or.us/agency/commission/](http://dfw.state.or.us/agency/commission/).

**IRRIGON MARINA PARK**  
ALL CONCERTS START AT 7:00PM

**Monday, July 26th**  
**CRUISE CONTROL**  
(Classic Rock)

Monday, August 9th • *Cale Moon*  
(Country)

Free Outdoor Music Festival

Funded by Morrow County Unified Recreation District  
Sponsored by North Morrow Community Foundation  
For information call: Donna @ 541-922-3197

**GOOD SHEPHERD COMMUNITY HEALTH FOUNDATION**  
**2021 FALL GRANTS**

Good Shepherd Community Health Foundation awards Fall Grants annually to qualified organizations for the betterment of health needs within our local service communities.

The deadline to submit a Fall Grant application is July 31st, 2021.

Applications can be made online at [gshealth.org/foundation/awards](http://gshealth.org/foundation/awards) or call the Foundation office at 541-667-3419 for further information.

**GOOD SHEPHERD COMMUNITY HEALTH FOUNDATION**