

# BMCC reviews FARM II after state cuts funding

College faculty see more potential in creating space for drone program

By ANTONIO SIERRA  
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Once on the precipice of construction, Blue Mountain Community College's FARM II project still is at the drawing board.

The basics of FARM II remain the same: an indoor rodeo arena with space for BMCC classes west of the Round-Up Grounds. The Pendleton Round-Up Association would lease its land west of Southwest 18th Street to provide land for the project. The city of Pendleton, which also owns land in the area, would make a deal with the Round-Up to relinquish its interest in the area.

What's changed is FARM II's funding outlook.

While the state once committed to covering the entirety of the facility's \$13 million price tag, the most recent legislative session saw lawmakers slash the state's allocation from bonds from \$6.5 million to \$3 million. At an Aug. 20 meeting of the BMCC Board of Education, interim President Connie Green explained how the project lost more than half of its funding.

"Even though we got it last time and no one complained, this time they did," she told the board. "Some complained that we were not financially viable: 'Why would you give a college not financially viable money to do this?' So instead of getting the \$6.5 (million) match, we got \$3 (million)."



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

A sign on Dec. 4, 2020, along Southwest 18th Street in Pendleton advertises the future site of Blue Mountain Community College's Facility for Agricultural Resource Management. Connie Green, BMCC interim president, said in August 2021 the agricultural department has suggested the college use FARM II for its unmanned aerial systems program rather than the veterinary program, which has not grown much in recent years.

With the support of Gov. Kate Brown, the Oregon Legislature approved the full funding of FARM II in 2019 through a combination of funds from bonds and the Oregon Lottery. Blue Mountain planned to get started on construction following the 2020 Round-Up, but encountered its first delay when the college learned that it would not get bond funding until 2021. But the college didn't make it to 2021 before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, tanking Oregon Lottery funds as restaurants and bars closed and canceling all of the 2019 projects the Legislature approved.

Over the past few sessions, a group of local leaders banded together to lobby the Legislature for regional projects like FARM II and the Umatilla County Jail renovation. Pendleton Mayor John Turner, a former Blue Mountain Community

College president, said the group believes the state still has federal stimulus dollars available to cover the shortfall. The group has a lobbyist in Salem who will try to convince legislators to fully fund FARM II at a future session.

In the meantime, the college is starting to reconsider what services FARM II will offer once its completed.

In an interview after the meeting, Green said the college initially wanted to feature veterinary studies classes in addition to offering a permanent home to the college's rodeo team. But Green said the veterinary program hasn't grown much in recent years, and now college faculty think the space might be better suited for a different academic purpose. Green said the agricultural department has suggested Blue Mountain use FARM II for its unmanned

aerial systems program, where students could work with drones in an enclosed, controlled environment.

BMCC has endured tumult over the past two years. With student enrollment continuing to fall and the Oregon Department of Correction restructuring its contracts with community colleges, Blue Mountain has cut more than 42 positions since 2019. With new BMCC President Mark Browning set to start on Sept. 7, the college is attempting to restore its enrollment while facing competition for students from Walla Walla Community College, Columbia Basin College in Pasco and Baker Technical Institute. Throughout all this, Blue Mountain still is trying to secure funding for a new facility that will require its own maintenance and upkeep budget.

Green said agreements with the city of Pendleton and the Round-Up won't be finalized until FARM II is closer to fruition, but in negotiations with the city, municipal officials agreed to take over event promotion and management duties for the college when its not in use by BMCC. Green said that could offer a source of revenue for the facility that could offset its maintenance costs. Green added the set-up would benefit the city because it could market FARM II, the Pendleton Convention Center and the Vert Auditorium as a package of venues for potential events.

Pendleton City Manager Robb Corbett confirmed the details of the negotiations but added the two sides had not spoken about the issue in several months.

## LOCAL BRIEFING

### Two Milton-Freewater homes damaged in fire

MILTON-FREEWATER — A Milton-Freewater home was destroyed, another damaged and two people were injured in a fire this week, authorities said.

According to information sent Thursday, Sept. 2, by Milton-Freewater Fire Chief Shane Garner, the blaze began at 4:51 p.m. Aug. 31, in a carport at a home at 920 N.E. Fourth Ave., Milton-Freewater.

The Milton-Freewater Fire Department and Milton-Freewater Rural Fire Department & EMS responded to the scene.

Garner said the home where the fire started was considered a total loss. The flames also reached another home at 1006 N.E. Fourth Ave., causing minor damage.

Two people suffered minor injuries during the fire and were treated by paramedics at the scene, Garner said. They were transported to a local hospital for further treatment.

No injuries to firefighters were reported.

The cause of the fire is under investigation, Garner said.

### TRCI reports first COVID-19 death in months

UMATILLA — Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla on Thursday, Sept. 2, reported its first COVID-19 death in months, according to a press release from the Oregon Department of Corrections.

In January, the prison reported at least 15 COVID-19 deaths in an outbreak that saw more than 600 adults in custody fall ill. The outbreak remains the largest among Oregon prisons since the pandemic started in March 2020.

With 788 total cases, more AICs have tested positive for COVID-19 at TRCI than at any other prison in Oregon.

However, in March, the prison completed offering COVID-19 vaccines to all its AICs. In all, more than 73% of the prison's AICs were immunized at that time. Since then, the prison has reported just 21 cases, according to state data. Twelve of those cases have been reported this month.

The prison's latest

COVID-19 victim is a man between 65-75 years old who died in the prison's infirmary Aug. 31. The state did not disclose whether he had underlying health conditions.

The prison has four active COVID-19 cases.

### Police arrest teens at high school following fight

HERMISTON — Hermiston police on Tuesday, Aug. 31, arrested two teens at Hermiston High School after reports of a fight the week before, and found one was packing a gun.

Police Chief Jason Edmiston in a post on the department's Facebook page reported officers on Aug. 26 at about 4 p.m. responded to the 200 block of Northwest 11th Street after receiving a report of several males in a physical fight. Suspects fled before police arrived, but officers spoke with two potential victims and were able to identify all persons involved.

That led police to contact a 16-year-old male and a 17-year-old male this week at Hermiston High School and take the pair into custody, according to Edmiston, and because they "had been very criminally active over the last year."

Officers took the teens to the Hermiston Police Department and found the 16-year-old was concealing a small-caliber firearm. Police arrested both for third-degree assault, and the 16-year-old on the additional charge of unlawful possession of a firearm. Police took both to Pendleton to be lodged with Umatilla County's juvenile department.

Edmiston stressed the police department tries its best to refrain from interrupting the school day, but in this case the circumstances and increasing criminal behavior of those involved prompted the department "to move forward at the end of the school day and take the individuals into custody."

Police continue to pursue a third individual. As an active case involving minors, Edmiston said he was unable to comment further.

— EO Media Group and Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

# Hermiston parks boss retires; city attorney is next

By ERICK PETERSON  
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Latin music and happy chatter filled Hermiston's Harkenrider Senior Center on Wednesday, Sept. 1, as folks gave a joyful send off to Larry Fetter, Hermiston's long-serving parks and recreation director.

Fetter retired at the end of the week.

People often ask him if his life in the parks and recreation department resembles the zany, antic-fueled TV show, "Parks and Recreation."

"There's some interesting analogies," he said.

From day to day, you never know what will come in through the door, he said. During his tenure, people came to him with new ideas. When someone asks for a dodgeball league, for example, he is nonplussed. Sure, he thinks. Why not?

During his time with parks and recreation, he has seen trends come and go. Right now, family physical fitness activities are popular. He has helped organize obstacle courses, a recent children's triathlon and the



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian/Hermiston Herald

Hermiston Parks and Recreation Director Larry Fetter talks with guests Tuesday, Sept. 1, 2021, during a retirement party in his honor at the Harkenrider Senior Center in Hermiston.

bathtub races at the city's Melon Fest.

"Things like that make this job very interesting," he said.

When he started his career in 1984, he began a parks and recreation program in Colville, Washington. Youth soccer and basketball were big. A 100-mile-long ride around the area also was popular. There were brew-making events.

Here in Hermiston, traditional events, Festival Street activities, tree lightings and firework shows have become mainstays. People expect them, and his department

hosts them frequently. One event can draw 5,000 to 6,000 people.

Fetter has served as Hermiston's parks and rec director for 10 years. He said he was proud to have been the director during the third iteration of the Funland Playground at the foot of the Hermiston Butte. Fetter said he has heard from people visiting from out of town who will stay for up to three days just for the playground.

He also said the city will need to manage it well. Funland Playground reopened July 4 following a community effort to rebuild

the site after a fire burned it down in 2019. A fire in 2001 burned down the original playground, which the city built in 1996.

He called the destruction of the previous playground "heart-wrenching." If the completion of the new playground was a highlight of his tenure, the ruin of the old one was a low. Ruled as arson, the fire pained Fetter and many people in the community.

In anticipation of his retirement, he and his department created a park's plan update, which the city council adopted. This sets the development plan for parks in Hermiston for the next 10 years. A wellness center with an indoor aquatic center is one of the showcase items in this plan. It also includes a trail expansion, making a 10-mile loop.

Hermiston City Manager Byron Smith said Fetter accomplished much in this role and credited him with making "a great vision for the park's department, for recreation programs."

The city is hiring to replace Fetter and in the meantime appointed recreation manager Brandon Artz as the parks interim director.

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