

Bi-Mart pharmacies move customer files to nearby pharmacies

ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

The long lines at local pharmacy checkouts may grow even longer, as Bi-Mart pharmacies close and ship customer files to other locations.

Don Leber, Bi-Mart vice president of marketing and advertising, explained the situation in an interview Thursday, Oct. 28. As Bi-Mart sold its pharmacies to Walgreens, most Bi-Mart pharmacies began closing — 56 in the Northwest, including 37 in Oregon. In cities where there is a Walgreens, Bi-Mart is sending customer files to Walgreens.

Several towns, however, do not have a nearby Walgreens pharmacy, which is the case for Bi-Marts in Hermiston, Pendleton, Baker City and La Grande. The distance from one of these locations to the nearest Walgreens pharmacy — in Kennewick, Ontario or Walla Walla — would involve a drive of more than 30 miles to around 100 miles, depending on location.

As commutes to distant pharmacies is impractical, Leber said arrangements are in the works to send customer files to other pharmacies.

The Hermiston Bi-Mart pharmacy, which closed Oct. 26, began transferring files to the Hermiston Safeway pharmacy Oct. 27, Leber said. Pendleton's files are going to the pharmacy at the town's Safeway as well on Nov. 11, the day after Bi-Mart's last day of operations, Leber said. The La Grande Bi-Mart pharmacy is likely to transfer files to Safeway, too, though a deal was not yet confirmed, Leber said. The transition would occur in mid-November.

On Oct. 28, Leber said he did not know where Baker City files would be shipped. Discussions over their transfer were ongoing. He said the Baker City Bi-Mart pharmacy would be open into November and would not close before a decision was made.

He added these dates are subject to change. Leber said Walgreens will keep 10 Oregon Bi-Mart pharmacies open. These pharmacies will operate under the Walgreens name. The list of 10 had yet to be confirmed by Thursday.

The problem of closing pharmacies

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, released a letter Oct. 20 referencing the Bi-Mart sale. In the letter, he expressed his "deep concerns about these closures."

Wyden, in the letter, alludes also to fees that impose "financial strain" on pharmacies, which has caused 2,200 U.S. pharmacies to close. His letter calls for a "formal review of pharmacy closures in the U.S. in the last five years" and for regulation of fees.

Leber said that these fees, which Wyden sees as a problem, cost Bi-Mart millions of dollars every year. This is forcing the company to make this decision to exit the pharmacy business.

"We could no longer do it at a profit," he said. "Long haul, it would put Bi-Mart in jeopardy."

Grant funds open door for local transit project

Aim is to begin transit plan in 18 to 24 months

BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Public transportation for Hermiston area residents working in the east end of Morrow County could become easier.

The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners last week adopted a new plan that will allow the county to seek grant funding for a transit service connecting people who live miles away from where they work, according to county and tribal officials.

J.D. Tovey, planning director for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, said money from the Statewide Transportation Improvement Fund is making this possible.

The routes are called the Hermiston to Boardman Connector transit route and the Port of Morrow Circular route. The CTUIR, Kayak Public Transit and Morrow County's transit service are leading the project. Umatilla County also is a partner, according to county documents.

"I think it's a wonderful project," Commissioner George Murdock said. "There's thousands of people who go from Hermiston to



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Passengers prepare to board a Kayak Public Transit bus Monday, Oct. 25, 2021, near the Pendleton Walmart. A project using a Statewide Transportation Improvement Fund grant looks to make commuting for workers from the Hermiston area to Boardman and the Port of Morrow a reality.

that area to work every day."

Tovey said the project will allow workers to bus with ease between Hermiston, Boardman and the Port of Morrow, an area with some of the largest workforces in Eastern Oregon, many of which are centered around the agricultural industry and food processing.

Tovey described workers moving through that area as "one of the largest intercounty migrations" in Oregon.

"The whole goal is to get people to work," Megan Green, Umatilla County's transit coordinator, said.

The plan also is intended to help East Morrow County

residents connect to medical services and grocery stores available only in Hermiston, officials say.

And with more funds coming from the Statewide Transportation Improvement Fund, they hope to begin the service sometime in the next 18 to 24 months.

"I'd love to start tomorrow if we could," said Tovey, who added, "We're marching forward."

The county already has invested STIF funding into the project for the next two years, with \$150,000 for the 2022 fiscal year and \$166,000 for 2023. Green said the new STIF funds will go toward

route development, identifying parking rights, planning funds, buying buses and getting drivers.

Tovey, who has spearheaded the project for years, said the funds will allow officials to purchase two or three additional buses that will make additional stops in places like Hermiston, Boardman, Echo, Stanfield and the Port of Morrow.

Tovey said he hopes the transit service will provide a comfortable and safe way to go back and forth to work, allowing workers to nap, read and talk with their families during their commute.

ODFW approves killing wolf in Umatilla County

East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — A livestock producer has received permission from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to kill a wolf in Umatilla County.

ODFW on Thursday, Oct. 28, authorized the killing of one wolf after OR30 wolves continued to prey on livestock.

Fish and Wildlife will provide a kill permit to a livestock producer who requested the option after ODFW confirmed wolves last week preyed on a calf in a private pasture.

Since early June, OR30 wolves have depredated six times on private land pastures, resulting in the death or injury of five sheep and five calves. A previous removal permit for these wolves to a different producer expired on Aug. 31 with no wolves taken.

ODFW can authorize "lethal take" in chronic depredation situations when there is significant risk to livestock present in the area.

The permit allows the producer or their agent to kill one wolf on the private land they are using within the OR30 Wolves Area of Known Wolf Activity. The permit expires Nov. 22, when the one wolf is killed,

or when the producer's livestock are removed from the area, whichever comes first.

The permit limits the method of killing to shooting the wolf from the ground.

Under the rules, livestock producers must be using and document nonlethal methods appropriate to the situation before lethal control can be considered. Also, there can be no identified circumstances on the property (such as bone piles or carcasses) that are attracting wolves. During each livestock investigation as well as during each trip to the investigation sites, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife searched the immediate area for any bone piles, carcasses or other attractants and found none.

The producer has and continues to remove any dead, sick or injured livestock from their pasture to reduce the risk of attracting predators. They have maintained an increased human presence, working long hours (10-15 hours daily) to check livestock frequently using both horse and all-terrain vehicles.

Producers also have hazed wolves late into the night using firearms as noisemakers to scare them off. For several weeks, the producer has been camping on site to monitor and gather cattle.

Man arrested on charges of child sex crimes

By BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — A monthslong Hermiston police investigation led Tuesday, Oct. 26, to the arrest of a man for a slew of child sex crimes, according to Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston.

Steven Ira Brown, 36, is in the Umatilla County Jail, Pendleton, for felony counts of using a child in sexual conduct, second-degree sexual abuse, luring a minor, and misdemeanor counts of contributing to the sexual delinquency of a minor and third-degree sexual abuse.

Edmiston said police

began investigating Brown in June. He wouldn't disclose any details about the charges, but said the victim involved in the case is a 16-year-old girl who knew Brown. He said Brown's alleged actions started at least six months before the police investigation began.

Edmiston also wouldn't describe their relationship other than to say that the two knew each other, adding Brown was "not a stranger" to the teen.

Brown knew Hermiston police were investigating him, Edmiston said, as officers seized property from his home. Edmiston said Brown tried to hide from

police but was eventually found in his home. On Oct. 26, police waited outside his home. After calling his attorney, Brown "came out to face the music," Edmiston said.

Edmiston also described Brown as a "well-known social media warrior antagonist." On his Facebook page, Brown has posted several videos criticizing police and the Umatilla County District Attorney's Office.

Edmiston said police have been in the process of locking down digital information in the case that they will provide to prosecutors.

Brown remains in the local jail with a preliminary bail of \$100,000.

Umatilla Rural Fire boss under investigation

By BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

UMATILLA — The Umatilla Rural Fire Protection District has placed its fire chief, Steve Potts, on paid leave amid an investigation into an "internal matter," according to Kyle Sipe, chairman of the fire district board.

Sipe said two volunteers with the fire district recently met with him and had complaints about Potts. That prompted the board to place Potts on leave on Oct. 19 and hire a private investigator to look into the matter, Sipe said.

Sipe would not disclose any information about what the complaints were, nor why the board placed Potts on leave. He said he was "not at liberty" to discuss the ongoing investigation.

Potts did not respond to a call seeking comment.

Scott Stanton, chief of Umatilla Fire District No. 1, will take charge of the department for now, Sipe said.

Sipe, an instructional and robotics teacher with the Umatilla School District, could not elaborate on the

investigation's timeline and would not disclose any information about the investigator.

When the investigation

concludes, Sipe said the board will analyze the findings and determine what to do next.

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