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Santa Claus makes his way through the crowd Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, during the city of Hermiston's Christmas tree lighting event on Festival Street in downtown Hermiston.

Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A special Santa

Former local mayor lights Hermiston Christmas tree despite stage four cancer

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Santa Claus beamed as he made his way through the crowd Thursday, Dec. 2, for Hermiston's annual Christmas tree lighting ceremony.

John Perkins, sporting his own white beard and wearing a traditional red suit, looked the very image of a jolly old elf. But he struggled to be there.

With the aid of a red-and-white-striped cane, he took the event stage. Santa flipped a switch, the lights on the large tree in the center of town began to glow, and the crowd cheered.

Perkins, 70, might not turn those lights on next season. He has stage four pancreatic cancer.

Fulfilling Christmas duties

After receiving more applause, Father Christmas made his way to a sleigh near the tree, where a line of families waited. He welcomed child after child, hearing their Christmas wishes



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Santa Claus, also known as John Perkins, flips the switch on the city of Hermiston's Christmas tree Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, during a tree lighting ceremony on Festival Street in downtown Hermiston.

and offering them candy canes and kind words.

One Hermiston family gave testament to the magnetism of this Santa. Alberto Munoz and Marina Longoria said this was the first time their son, Tito, 3, saw Santa in person, and they liked this one.

"It was great, especially after COVID," Munoz said.

Like many other people in the crowd, they were enjoying the normalcy of a regular event. Last year, the annual tree lighting was

broadcast for viewers online, not in person.

Tito, a fan of the cartoon "The Loud House," told Santa he hoped to get presents related to the show, his parents said. After seeing Santa, Tito said he liked Santa and his white beard.

Many more children had similar positive experiences with Saint Nick as they, too, met him and discussed their Christmas wish list. Santa continued to smile, but he soon grew

tired. Helped to his feet, he was led gingerly to a seat in a nearby church to rest. At 6:40 p.m., he started his break. By the time he was able to return, however, the few people who remained had left. Santa was free to go.

On his way out, he spoke about his enjoyment of this celebration.

The children made him laugh, he said, and they caused him to remember his own childhood. One boy, Perkins said, asked for a train, and Santa was not sure if the youngster wanted a toy train or a life-sized one. Either way, he said, it made him think of his own boyhood and the train his parents gave him.

Perkins, who had met several dozen children up to the point of his break that night, said getting tired was not ordinary for him. In years past, when he had played Santa, he had more endurance, he added.

"I could go hours," he said.

Not this time. Assisted by another person, he walked carefully to his wife, who was waiting for him in their car. Still smiling, he wished children "Merry Christmas" as he walked away.

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Pendleton road deal circles back to county

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — For the second time in two months, the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners voted to provide the city of Pendleton \$2 million to help build a new road, this time with a written agreement to back it up.

At a meeting Tuesday, Dec. 1, the commissioners unanimously voted to provide the seed money for a revolving fund that would build a new road connecting Highway 11 and Highway 30 on Pendleton's South Hill. Pendleton city officials anticipate the proposed road will lead to new single-family housing developments on bare land in the area.

"The building of homes will not only increase the economy, it's also going to provide places for people to put kids in our schools (and) shop locally," Pendleton Mayor John Turner told the commissioners at the meeting. "It's going to be a huge economic booster to our community."

Commissioners previously voted to approve the deal on Nov. 10, but without making the accompanying document available at the meeting. At the time, George Murdock, the board chair, explained the written agreement wasn't available because county counsel Doug Olsen was out of the office. Commissioner Dan Dorran said he supported the project but couldn't vote for it without seeing the document, but the vote still passed 2-1.

Olsen's absence, however, didn't prevent Murdock from providing information about the agreement just one day before that meeting in his "Weekly Public Officials Update," an email he sends to certain people. But none of what Murdock explained in the email about the deal was available to the public on the county board's online meeting agenda.

But with the contract publicly available at the Dec. 1 meeting, Dorran joined Murdock and Commissioner John Shafer in approving the deal. In an interview, Murdock said the first time they voted on it as a "concept" and the second time they were approving the actual deal.

Murdock during the Nov. 10 meeting, however, did not describe the deal as a "concept," and neither Shafer nor Dorran appeared to have details about the deal at that time.

The \$2 million sent to Pendleton is not a straight-up grant, but instead structured as a revolving fund, meaning the city is expected to reinvest money back into the fund after withdrawing from it. City officials expect to replenish the fund by creating a reimbursement district where developers pay for the cost of the street as they start building houses.

The \$2 million is coming out of the county's general fund, the fund the county uses to pay for a significant amount of the county's payroll and services. For the 2021-22 fiscal year, the general fund budget was \$36.5 million, with \$3 million unappropriated.

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Marigold appeals to council to keep business license

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The Pendleton City Council will become a jury for a day to decide the fate of The Marigold Hotel.

Following a shooting at the 105 S.E. Court Ave. hotel, the city sent Marigold owner Shivam Patel a letter notifying him it would suspend and then revoke his business license. In accordance with city law, Patel is appealing staff's decision to the city council at its Tuesday, Dec. 7 meeting.

In the Nov. 15 letter from the city to Patel, Finance Director Linda Carter wrote the city intended to suspend and revoke his license after the Nov. 9 shooting.

"Additionally, there is record of

considerable activity at your hotel which violates law and you have previously been notified by the Pendleton Police Department of those conditions at that property," she wrote. "In July of 2021, you entered into an agreement with the Pendleton police chief to operate this business in compliance with the law and with special conditions designed to prevent criminal activity on the premises. You have not complied with the terms of that agreement."

In an interview after the city suspended Marigold's license, Pendleton Police Chief Chuck Byram said the hotel had established a pattern of attracting criminal activity and the business' management was "complicit in said criminal activity."

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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

A police car on Nov. 9, 2021, blocks access to Southeast First Street in front of The Marigold Hotel in downtown Pendleton following a shooting at the hotel. After the city suspended the hotel's business license late last month, the hotel plans to appeal the decision to city council at its Tuesday, Dec. 7, meeting.



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