

# Commission delays decision on BackFire proposal

By ANTONIO SIERRA  
East Oregonian

Moto Stuff in Hillsboro.

The council signed off on the sale in 2020 and agreed to bestow Moto Stuff with a \$494,819 grant as a part of a \$1.3 million project to renovate the former fire hall into a viable business. A year later, Bennett told the commission the renovation effort mostly was complete: facade work was 80% complete and second story improvements were 90% complete, she reported.

The couple said they already moved Moto Stuff and an associated business, SRC Moto, to Pendleton, and added a restaurant and lounge to BackFire Station. Their businesses employed 10 people, and they anticipated hiring 10 more once they finished renovations and added new features, including lodging, a service shop and motorcycle rentals.

But the renovation process had not gone smoothly for the Moto Stuff owners. In accordance with recent trends, construction materials came in higher than expected and construc-

PENDLETON — The owners of BackFire Station told the Pendleton Development Commission they'll need more money to complete their project, but the commission wants to until next week before making a decision.

The commission held a special meeting Tuesday, Dec. 14, to consider two requests. BackFire owners Scott Hart and Erin Bennett told the commission, who also are the members of the city council, they were asking the city to expedite reimbursements on the urban renewal grants they've already received in addition to another \$188,288 to cover cost overruns.

After soliciting proposals, the Pendleton City Council handpicked Moto Stuff, the motorcycle parts company Hart and Bennett own, to become the first business to privately own the old Fire Station No. 1 at 911 S.W. Court Ave. For Hart, it was a homecoming after starting



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

**Scott Hart, left, and Erin Bennett, owners of BackFire Station, string up Christmas lights Dec. 4, 2021, at the eatery in Pendleton. The business owners are seeking more funding from the Pendleton Development Commission to complete their transformation of the city's former fire station into a business with food and lodging.**

tion labor was in short supply, extending the timeline of the project. The pair estimated the ongoing renovations were costing them as much as \$1,800 per day.

Hart said he and Bennett had taken serious measures to complete BackFire Station, including cashing in his retirement account.

"It's been frustrating, but

it's the reality we're living in," he said.

Hart and Bennett sought additional help from the development commission once before.

In May, the owners requested \$66,677 to help cover the costs of installing fire suppression sprinklers in the building, a required feature that wasn't included

in their initial request. Applicants are allowed to return to the commission with change order requests, but the amount Hart and Bennett were requesting required them to get approval from the commission's grant committee before making their case to the full commission. Charles Denight, the commission's associate director, said in an interview the committee denied the owners' request over concerns the project was getting too expensive.

Hart and Bennett's latest appeal was made directly to the commission and is more encompassing.

Moto Stuff's first request is to expedite reimbursements from the grants it already has received. Rather than grant recipients up front, it's the development commission's policy to reimburse them after the commission receives the project's receipts. The commission makes reimbursements in parts as the project hits benchmarks on its way to completion.

Hart and Bennett said the commission has fallen behind

in its reimbursements, but the pair also wants the commission to pay out the rest of the grant as soon as possible rather than wait until the project is finished to make the final reimbursements.

The BackFire Station owners second request is more straightforward: \$188,288, or 40% of the \$470,721 in cost overruns they've accrued.

After Hart and Bennett finished their presentation, the commission didn't commit one way or another. Mayor John Turner suggested some compromises, namely getting up-to-date on reimbursements and narrowing the scope of the request to focus on covering some of the costs of the fire sprinklers.

The commission ultimately decided to make a decision at its next meeting once it got a chance to take a look at a more thorough breakdown of costs and payment options. The commission is scheduled to meet again Dec. 21. It's the commission's last scheduled meeting of the year.

## ELF ON THE SCHOOL



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**Brad Bixler, superintendent of the Helix School District, waves from atop the school building Friday, Dec. 17, 2021, while dressed as an Elf on the Shelf as students arrive for the school day. Parents dreamed up the idea and costume, and Bixler said he was eager to help. "We have such enthusiastic parents and a supportive (Parent Teacher Organization)," he said. "I was more than happy to jump in." Or jump on a shelf.**

## Silage fire burns in southwest Hermiston

East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 reported Thursday, Dec. 16, there is little it can do to extinguish a silage pile that has been burning for more than a week.

The fire district the morning of Dec. 8 responded to the fire. Crews found a large pile of corn silage that had self heated and began to openly burn, according to a press release. Firefighter extinguished the flames and returned several times after the fire flared up.

"These types of fires occur when organic materials begin to break down," the press release explained, which releases heat, and in the right conditions can lead to smoldering and open combustion. The fire district said this pile has all the components for this type of fire — moist organic material, decomposition, compression and ventilation. And recent high winds provided the ventilation to bring the combustion to the surface of the pile.

"This fire is a large smoldering pile of organic material that requires the use of heavy equipment and water to complete extinguishment," according to the press release. "To simply flow water on this type of fire as has been suggested by some citizens, will do nothing to mitigate the

smoke in a timely fashion."

The district compared the fire to a fire in a trash can inside a residence. Flowing water on the roof of the structure would have no effect on putting out the fire in the can.

"This is not a hostile fire at this time," the press release continued. "We are well aware of the impact that the smoke is having on the community, and the land owner is taking all the required actions to complete extinguishment of this fire."

Those actions include the use of water trucks and heavy equipment. The district explained it lacks that kind of heavy equipment and does not have operators to handle it.

The press release also explained this fire does not fall under the district's open burning regulations and is unintentional.

It also is burning in an open pit and is not creating a hazard to anything surrounding that area.

"Therefore, the incident has been turned back to the property owner to complete the extinguishment of the fire," according to the press release.

Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 also stated it has been in contact with the city of Hermiston, Umatilla County Smoke Management and the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality regarding the fire.

## Multi-agency search continues for missing woman

East Oregonian

CONDON — The search to find a missing Boardman woman resumed Friday morning, Dec. 17, near Condon.

The Gilliam County Sheriff's Office reported an extensive search for Autumn Jones, 22, concluded Dec. 16 due to darkness and weather conditions.

Hunters on Dec. 15 near Condon found the red 2014 Volkswagen Jetta belonging to Jones. The next day, according to the sheriff's office, more than 70 searchers covered approximately 2,700 acres in the vicinity of the vehicle.

"Searchers used drones, ATVs and tracking dogs, and traveled by horseback and walked over the rolling terrain," according to the update on the Facebook page for the Gilliam County Sheriff's Office.

"Conditions challenged search efforts, and overnight snow increased difficulty. Despite the exhaustive search, crews were not able to locate Autumn Jones, and her whereabouts remain unknown."

"I want to emphasize the quality and professionalism of the search teams that have reinforced the efforts of our local agencies. We are very appreciative of their support," Sheriff Gary Bettencourt said in the post. "We are committed to finding Autumn Jones."

The search resumed early Friday morning.

Jones left her family's home in Morrow County on Nov. 27. She told her family she was going for a drive. She called her family around 1:30 a.m. on Nov. 28 and stated she was lost. Using a cellphone application, her family placed Jones in Wheeler County. Law enforcement searched but did not find Jones.

A mail carrier on Nov. 29 reported seeing Jones' car, a red 2014 Volkswagen Jetta, near Fossil. Sheriff's depu-

ties from Wheeler, Morrow and Grant counties coordinated search teams to find Jones in the following days, but the efforts did not find Jones or the car.

Hunters on Dec. 15 found Jones' empty vehicle in a canyon near Condon. The search Dec. 16 involved more than a dozen sheriff's offices, search and rescue teams, other agencies and volunteers, according to a press release from the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office, which provided a public information officer for the search.

Jones is 5 feet, 10 inches tall, has blue eyes, medium-length brown hair, and

weighs about 300 pounds. She was last seen wearing a black Riverside T-shirt, black sweatshirt, black tennis shoes and possibly a black Carhartt coat. Jones' Volkswagen Jetta wagon has an expired Washington State temporary registration in the rear window and an All-Star Cars dealer plate.

If you have seen Jones, her car, or have other information about her disappearance, contact the Gilliam County Sheriff's Office at 541-351-9530.

The Gilliam County Sheriff's Office will continue to provide updates on its Facebook page.

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