

Top 10:

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To that end, the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners on Sept. 8 agreed to provide 10 acres at the intersection of Lind and Bensel roads, Hermiston, for the construction of a warming station and temporary living huts. The deal involves Umatilla, Hermiston, Echo and Stanfield working together to find a comprehensive solution to assist those experiencing homelessness.

9) Heat wave breaks temperature records, claims lives

PENDLETON — An extended surge in high temperatures in late June shattered records across the region, sometimes by as much as 5 degrees. According to the National Weather Service, temperatures on June 29 in Pendleton peaked at 117 degrees and in Hermiston at 118 degrees — all-time modern highs for the two cities. The normal temperatures for this time of year are in the mid-80s.

Cole Evans, a forecaster for the weather service station in Pendleton, said, “The sheer magnitude of the temperatures is unprecedented.”

A heat dome was the reason for the record temperatures. Evans explained a layer of high atmospheric pressure formed over the Northwest, allowing warmer temperatures to build over time until they crested.

The blazing heat prompted baby hawks to bail from their nests and plummet to the ground. Blue Mountain Wildlife, the wild bird rescue and rehabilitation center just outside Pendleton, took in nearly 50 nestling hawks in late June, and the staff there had to euthanize 13 raptors due to the extent of their injuries.

Along with the scorching heat came record-breaking drought. The conditions prompted Umatilla County and the city of Pendleton to ban fireworks as residents prepared to celebrate the Fourth of July. Extreme fire danger, large wildfires and few firefighting resources prompted U.S. Forest Service officials on July 16 to temporarily close the entire Umatilla National Forest, a move that records show was a first.

The heat also claimed the life of James Anfeldt, 46, a Spokane man working construction in Pendleton and living with his 6-year-old son in a trailer in Hermiston. He died June 24, when temperatures had dropped to the 90s but the trailer he was living in reached 130 degrees inside.

The Oregon Medical Examiner's Office by December reported the heat wave claimed 116 lives in the state.

8) BMCC rides out another bumpy year, ends with new president

PENDLETON — Blue Mountain Community College rode out a roller coaster of a year.

BMCC was coming off a rough 2020 when it reached a deal in January with the Oregon Department of Corrections on a new contract to continue offering adult education classes at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, Pendleton, and Two Rivers Correctional Institution, Umatilla. Still, it was \$1.25 million, a big drop from the previous contract of \$3 million.

Then a cancer diagnosis prompted BMCC President Dennis Bailey-Fougner to resign Feb. 11 after 23 months on the job.

The college board turned to Connie Green to take the role of interim president. She served in the same capacity for six months in 2018 and 2019 after the previous president left.

Green oversaw the college as it dealt with a \$1.9 million shortfall, and on April 30, the Blue Mountain Community College Board of Education voted 5-2 to cut 14 positions, including seven layoffs.

“This is a really hard list,” Green said at the time. “These are real people with real lives that made an impact on students.”

The college board in June



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

The former headquarters of Pendleton Grain Growers in Pendleton now belongs to La Grande-based Braseth Properties. PGG announced Dec. 16, 2021, the cooperative paid members, avoided bankruptcy and is heading finalizing dissolution.

approved a \$44.2 million budget that codified a nearly 3% cut to the general fund, including the layoffs.

The college on June 23 announced Mark Browning as its next president. Browning, the vice president of college relations at the College of Western Idaho in Nampa, emerged from a four-person field of finalists, beating out two other candidates with presidential experience. He started on Sept. 7.

And Blue Mountain and Washington State University Tri-Cities signed a new deal to facilitate transfers between the two schools. Gov. Kate Brown promised to allocate the final piece of funding for BMCC's \$13 million multi-purpose facility, the FARM II project. And by December, BMCC hired a new chief operating officer as it reorganized its administrative structure in the wake of the job cuts.

7) Dollar store chains come in droves to Eastern Oregon

PILOT ROCK — Pilot Rock, which lost 11% of its population in the last census, was the hottest market for dollar stores in Umatilla County.

Eyes North Corp. of Chicago is building the store at 241 S.W. Fourth St. and then leasing it to the Family Dollar chain of dollar stores. Eyes North President Randy Coakley said national dollar store chains realized Oregon was an untapped market and began expanding accordingly.

When the Family Dollar in Pilot Rock is completed in 2022, it will complement its other location in Boardman. Family Dollar's competitor, Dollar General, intends to replace Pilot Rock's old hardware store with a dollar store on top of the stores it already built or is in the process of developing in Hermiston, Umatilla, Milton-Freewater, Irrigon and Heppner.

With the exception of Hermiston, all of the new dollar stores are going in towns with less than 10,000 people. And Pilot Rock, population 1,328 people, is getting both dollar store chains.

Business in Pilot Rock also picked up. A new bar called The Vault Tavern has opened up in the old Archie's Restaurant space and a new hunting store has opened right next door on Main Street. Teri Bacus, Pilot Rock city recorder, said the town is working on an economic development plan with Eastern Oregon Business Source and expects all of these businesses to be a part of the revitalization effort.

6) Local providers strained after Bi-Mart pharmacies close

HERMISTON — The long lines at local pharmacy checkouts grew longer in the last quarter of 2021, as Bi-Mart closed its pharmacies and shipped customer files to other locations.

Don Leber, Bi-Mart vice president of marketing and advertising, explained as the company 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 sent customer files there.

Hermiston, Pendleton, Baker City and La Grande lacked a Walgreens less than 30 miles away.

The Hermiston Bi-Mart pharmacy closed Oct. 26 and transferred files to the Hermiston Safeway pharmacy Oct. 27, Leber said. Pendleton's files went to the Safeway there on Nov. 11, the day after Bi-Mart's last day of operations, Leber said.

Bi-Mart's change meant locals

sometimes were in line at pharmacies for hours at a time.

In response to the company's move, U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, released a letter Oct. 20 expressing his “deep concerns about these closures” and the “financial strain” on pharmacies, which has caused 2,200 U.S. pharmacies to close. His letter called for a “formal review of pharmacy closures in the U.S. in the last five years” and for regulation of fees.

Leber said those fees cost Bi-Mart millions of dollars every year.

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

5) PGG avoids bankruptcy, pays out members

PENDLETON — Pendleton Grain Growers in mid-December paid more than \$12 million to its more than 1,000 members as heads to dissolution.

PGG Board President Tim Hawkins explained that before the grain cooperative shut down most of its operations, a portion of its proceeds were put into a patronage account that was paid out to members on a revolving basis every 10-12 years. But instead of members getting a cut of operational profits, PGG was distributing money from the co-op's methodical sale of all its assets and properties.

The end had been coming for the once-venerable agricultural cooperative for the better part of a decade.

PGG overstated its earnings in 2010 and 2011, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture temporarily suspended PGG's warehouse license because of discrepancies in its audits. PGG ran in the red in 2013 and 2014 and soon found itself millions of dollars in debt. PGG members in 2016 voted to dissolve the co-op.

Sine then, PGG sold its grain division to United Grain Corp. and then swiftly sold many of its non-Pendleton retail buildings to businesses and nonprofits. But some of PGG's most prominent Pendleton properties stayed with PGG until the dominoes began to fall in 2020 and 2021.

Hawkins said it's been a long road from the dissolution vote until now, but he felt good about PGG's position. The co-op avoided bankruptcy, paid off all of its debt and sold most of its properties. Hawkins said he expected PGG to dissolve completely in mid 2022 after it finishes selling its final three properties and resolves some patronages it has with other companies that should lead to more payments to members.

4) Funland Park

HERMISTON — A large gathering on July 4 at Hermiston's Butte Park celebrated the opening of the third iteration of Funland Playground. Fires in 2001 and 2019 destroyed previous versions of the playground.

Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann, alongside a large group of children, cut the ribbon on the newest Funland Playground. A stilt walker dressed as Uncle Sam, a pair of pirates and Santa Claus were part of the festivities.

Locals, who turned out to see the new playground, reported their pleasure. Slides, they said, were among their favorite new play structures, as was equipment shaped like various fruits and vegetables. Larry Fetter, director of Hermiston Parks and Recreation, too, expressed his approval of the playground and its unique features.

The playground came with a \$1.75 million price tag. An insurance payout of \$752,000 from the previous playground paid for part of this cost.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Children climb on a play structure July 4, 2021, during the grand opening of the new Funland Playground in Hermiston.

The Funland Fundraising Committee, in partnership with Hermiston Parks and Recreation, raised an additional \$810,000. Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions clubs, as well as others, helped fundraise for the project.

Due to Funland's history with fires, the new structure was built with fire-resistant materials and features surveillance cameras and other security to deter vandalism.

3) Pendleton shuts down The Marigold Hotel

PENDLETON — A shooting Nov. 9 at The Marigold Hotel in downtown Pendleton started the final push to the city shutting down the business.

The shooting injured a 17-year-old boy, and soon after the city suspended the business license for the hotel at 105 S.E. Court Ave. Marigold owner Shivam Patel appealed the decision to Pendleton City Council.

Patel and his attorney, Matthew Lowe, assured the council the owner would take a much more active role in The Marigold going forward. But the council on Dec. 7 unanimously voted to uphold the city staff's decision to suspend and revoke The Marigold's business license.

Pendleton police Chief Chuck Byram said Steven Enko, the man police arrested for the shooting, was the “significant other” of a hotel employee and was allowed to stay at the hotel unbeknownst to Patel. According to Lowe, however, Enko was visiting a hotel guest. Byram said even after police informed Patel of Enko's connection to the hotel, he hesitated to believe their account.

Yanking the business licenses is not necessarily a permanent end to The Marigold. City Manager Robb Corbett could allow The Marigold to reopen once he determines it no longer is a threat to public safety.

2) Bailey's Bill reaches the finish line after difficult journey

ATHENA — Sexual predators hiding in the guise of school teachers in Oregon now face harsher criminal penalties thanks to the efforts of state Sen. Bill Hansell and Weston-McEwen High School student Bailey Munk.

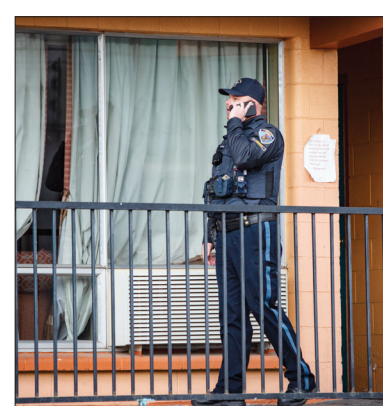
Hansell, Republican from Athena, sponsored Senate Bill 649, which he named after Munk. The bill increases penalties for criminal sexual contact with an underage victim if the offender was the victim's teacher.

Andrew DeYoe, an English teacher and a scorekeeper for the Weston-McEwen High volleyball team, abused Munk in 2019. She reported the abuse, but it took six months for the school district to put DeYoe on administrative leave, and he continued his criminal behavior. It would be almost a year before DeYoe, then 31, pleaded guilty to harassment that included sexual touching.

In the plea deal, DeYoe forfeited his teaching license, terminated his housing lease in Athena and agreed to have no contact with minors who are not family members. He spent one night in the Umatilla County Jail and got five years probation. He wasn't required to register as a sex offender.

If DeYoe had been a coach, he might have been convicted of a Class C felony, a crime that carries sentences up to five years in prison and a \$125,000 fine. Bailey's Bill rectified the discrepancy between coach and teachers.

The bill overcame political hurdles on its way to passing unanimously in both chambers.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Pendleton Police Chief Chuck Byram speaks on the phone Nov. 9, 2021, while on the scene of a shooting at The Marigold Hotel in downtown Pendleton.

Gov. Brown on June 23, signed it into law. Munk heard the news on June 26.

“I felt really happy and sort of relieved,” she said. “There were so many obstacles. I'm really happy that a teacher can now be prosecuted differently than DeYoe.”

Hansell called Munk the star of the team that worked to make the bill a new law.

“Bailey's willingness to step up was huge,” he said. “Not everybody could have done it.”

1) Chuck Sams becomes National Park Service director

PENDLETON — Chuck Sams began 2021 as the interim executive director of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and ended it as the director of the National Park Service.

A presidential nomination placed an administrator of a small tribal government in Eastern Oregon on the national stage, but Sams meteoric rise was still methodically planned and considered.

When Sams was named the interim executive director in late 2020, he quickly told the Board of Trustees that he wasn't interested in the permanent job. At the time, Sams said he was starting to look for opportunities outside tribal government.

That opportunity came in February, when Gov. Kate Brown announced she was nominating Sams for a seat on the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. The position offered broad influence over regional energy and conservation policy, but even as Sams started his new job, Brown was laying the groundwork for the next position.

With support from Brown and U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, President Joe Biden nominated Sams to be the next park service director in August.

It was a cause for celebration on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, where his former colleagues and contemporaries said Sams had long shown strong leadership ability and was prepared for the national spotlight.

Sams still needed confirmation from the Senate to secure the position, and despite the polarized nature of Congress, he didn't run into any major objections from legislators from either party. On Nov. 18, Sams was unanimously confirmed on a voice vote, becoming the first American Indian to lead the federal park system.

Sams' attention now turns toward Washington, D.C., where he plans to work on the park infrastructure and employee morale. But before he left for the capital, the tribes held one last celebration for Sams at the Mission Longhouse, dedicating a song to him at their Christmas powwow.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

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