

INSIDE CHECK OUT READING RECOMMENDATIONS IN GO!



NORTHEASTERN OREGON

Deputy district attorneys in short supply

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Counties across Eastern Oregon have struggled over the past few years to hire attorneys to prosecute criminal charges, and officials believe a variety of factors, including uncompetitive salaries, have contributed to the vacant positions.

Wallowa County is bereft of a deputy district attorney for its already strained staff.

Morrow County and Grant County each have just their district attorney to handle cases.

Umatilla County has just five prosecutors — including the district attorney — instead of the normal 10 attorneys.

Union County seems to have fared better, but even its office is down one deputy district attorney.

Only Baker County has a fully staffed prosecution team.

Every other county in Northeastern Oregon has positions open for deputy attorneys. Those positions have been hard to fill, and in some cases have been left open for at least three years.

Grant County District Attorney Jim Carpenter has had an open position since 2018 — except a brief period when a prosecutor fresh out of college worked for a short stint before leaving to become a local public defender. Carpenter remains the county's sole prosecutor.

"Following his departure, I had no confidence that I would be able to find a replacement," Carpenter wrote in an email, "especially knowing that areas such as Deschutes and Multnomah, which pay much better than northeastern counties can, had numerous openings and I would not be able to compete with them for quality applicants."

Carpenter had an agreement with Grant County that he would serve as county counsel in return for funding for a deputy district attorney position; before then, the role was funded through a grant. Unable to locate a suitable attorney to fill the role as deputy, he resigned from his position as counselor in February 2020.

Likewise, Wallowa County District Attorney Rebecca

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HERMISTON HOUSING

Developments up in 2021

But local market excludes college grads looking for a start

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The Hermiston Building Department approved 139 new housing unit permits in 2021, 14 more than in 2020.

The city touted the numbers in a press release Dec. 28. The total job value for housing and other development permits in 2021 was \$105.6 million.

Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said there were 129 site-built homes and 10 manufactured homes. He said the rise in new home construction is evidence of "strong, consistent, sustainable growth" in Hermiston.

That consistency matters, he said. A one-year surge, for example, he said, might indicate "one builder is going hard, but when they finish, we see a drop in activity."

The development also is spread geographically around the city, he said, and across different builders and developers.

"If one builder goes bankrupt, or one project runs into a major unforeseen cost, the community is able to keep adding housing," Morgan said.

Pandemic response helps homebuyers

Morgan credited historically low interest rates that have come in response to the coronavirus pandemic for fueling growth, which helped people afford homes.

"Dropping the interest rate on a 30-year mortgage on a \$250,000 loan just 1% from 4% to 3% ends up saving the borrower nearly



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Construction crews work on assembling a home Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022, off East Punkin Center Road in Hermiston. The city building department reported it approved 139 new housing unit permits in 2021, an increase of 14 from 2020.

\$50,000 in financing costs over the 30-year repayment period," Morgan said.

"For context on what that means as far as the city's tools that we have available to assist in housing affordability, one of the common requests that we get is to offer \$5,000 incentive for home buyers. If you take that same \$250,000 home, and give the borrower \$5,000 to go toward a down payment without touching the interest rate, it ends up only saving the borrower a total of about \$8,000 over 30 years, compared to the previous example where they save almost \$50,000."

The previous example, Morgan said, contrasts the power of city and national government.

"Simply put, in terms of incentivizing housing and helping with affordability, the city has a pea-shooter compared to the

Federal Reserve's bazooka," Morgan said.

Still, he added, there are actions a city can take, and Hermiston has. The city county approved reducing minimum lot sizes in development. He said that allowed builders "to fit more homes in to a development, and helps tip the scales on a lot of projects."

Morgan also said the city council "increased the maximum lot-coverage allowed, which allows builders to fit larger footprint homes on to lots." This, he said, made a lot of projects more profitable.

In addition, the council rezoned about 40 acres near Diagonal Boulevard from industrial to a mix of residential and commercial.

"Those properties had sat stuck in an undeveloped state for nearly 50 years as industrial land," Morgan said, "and now,

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A pair of new construction homes near completion Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022, in a housing development off East Theater Lane, Hermiston. The total job value for housing and other development permits in 2021 in Hermiston was \$105.6 million.

Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Schools urged to drop extracurricular activities

Oregon education, health officials warn of 'rapid' COVID-19 transmission in school activities

By MEERAH POWELL
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Oregon's education and health leaders say if schools continue to host extracurricular activities, "they should expect rapid transmission of COVID-19" that could prevent students from being able to attend class in-person due to isolation and quarantine periods.

Oregon's education and health leaders put out that warning in an advisory Monday, Jan. 3. The agencies say schools and organizations must either pause extracurricular activities or ensure they follow

specific COVID-19 safety protocols.

If schools choose to continue extracurriculars, the agencies said they need to clearly communicate the potential risks to families.

The message from the Oregon Department of Education and Oregon Health Authority comes as schools around the state begin their new terms and the omicron variant of the coronavirus continues to spread.

"It's all about trying to continue to ensure that our students can attend school in-person every day," ODE Director Colt Gill told OPB.

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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Masked students walk to their classes on Feb. 22, 2021, the first day of in-person instruction at Washington Elementary School in Pendleton. State health and education agencies are calling for schools to halt extracurricular activities in early 2022 to help stop the spread of the coronavirus.

