

Hermiston pub draws crowd for jalapeno popper contest

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Three guys entered a bar could be the start of a joke. But in this case, it is the beginning of what could be an annual tradition at a local pub.

Neighbor Dudes, the taphouse at 405 N. First St., Hermiston, on Saturday, Feb. 19, held its first Pop-off, a contest to find out what local resident has the best jalapeno poppers.

Tammy Speelman, manager, and Renee McCoy, server, explained the contest and its history.

They said three regulars were at the bar a few weeks ago. The guys were chatting, and their conversation drifted to jalapeno poppers. Each of the three men argued their poppers were the best.

To test their poppers, they agreed to bring their foods to the bar to try one another's poppers and decide who was the popper king.

"They put their money where their mouths were, and it went well," McCoy said.

Management at Neighbor Dudes took notice of the private contest and decided to hold a competition of their own.

"What we did was charge a \$5 entry fee," Speelman said, speaking of the contest. "They could make a popper at home, bring it in, and it would be judged on three categories — best flavor, presentation and most unusual."

Thirteen popper dishes were entered into the contest, and the bar was filled. McCoy said it was unusual for there to be so many customers in the place. Ordinarily, she said,



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian
Casidy Blair holds up her prize-winning jalapeno poppers Saturday, Feb. 19, 2022, at the Pop-off contest at Neighbor Dudes, Hermiston.

there might be around 15-20 people there on a Saturday afternoon. On the day of the popper contest, there were around 50. The bar had to

bring in another server to help. "Everyone loves poppers," Speelman said.

Though Neighbor Dudes does not usually serve poppers

or other foods, she said she was confident people would take to this contest — just not this much. The large crowd was more than what even she expected.

At least one of the three original popper makers were at the contest. Buzz around the bar was that he was the "popper king." Looking around at his competition, though, Jeff Kraupp, of Hermiston, said he might not win this particular contest.

"I don't think I'm going to win today, but I think I'm going to learn a lot," he said.

Other competitors expressed a little more confidence. Mena Dudley, Ryan Stant, Jennifer Sword and Allen Sword spoke excitedly about their poppers, which were the result of a collaboration. Their dish was made with homemade pork sausage.

"We've been making these for a couple of years now," Allen Sword said, "but we haven't done a competition before."

It was Casidy Blair who won the contest, though. The new popper queen took home \$55 cash as a prize.

"I love jalapeno poppers, so I've been making them for a while," she said.

Her husband, Ben Blair, stepped in to say that she has been cooking poppers for around 15 years.

She made her poppers with candied jalapenos, cream cheese, various other cheeses and bacon.

McCoy said Neighbor Dudes is likely to host another contest in the near future.

"I think we'll do wings next," she said. She and the manager said they would talk more and decide on a date.

New dispensary looking to open in Pendleton

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The city of Pendleton could add a fifth cannabis dispensary later this year.

The Pendleton Planning Commission at its upcoming meeting is holding a public hearing on a conditional use application from an unnamed dispensary with a proposed location of 31 S.W. Nye Ave., sandwiched between the Social Security Administration office and the Hampton Inn.

The owner of the store is Bimalpreet Bath of Walla Walla, who owns a chain of head shops called Vape 'N Goods in Walla Walla and Milton-Freewater. Also attached to the development is Wave Design Group, a Kennewick-based firm that's designed restaurants, office spaces and government buildings in the Tri-Cities area.

The dispensary's application states the building will be a 5,000 square foot store that shouldn't have any traffic or security impacts on the surrounding area.

Should the planning commission approve the dispensary, the business would take one of the few remaining locations a marijuana business could establish itself.

After Oregon voters legalized marijuana consumption and sales in 2014, the state's



Phil Wright/East Oregonian

A new cannabis dispensary plans to open at this vacant lot at 31 S.W. Nye Ave., Pendleton, between the Social Security Administration office and the Hampton Inn. According to the notice at the site, the Pendleton Planning Commission is holding a public hearing about the store at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 24, 2022, in the city council chambers at Pendleton City Hall, 500 S.W. Dorion Ave.

only requirement for cannabis business locations was they not be within 1,000 feet of a school. But the state allowed cities and counties to make their own rules, and even opt out of legal marijuana sales entirely.

As Pendleton voters approved marijuana sales in 2016, the city council approved more stringent location requirements: cannabis businesses could not be located within 1,000 feet of a park or another marijuana business. Given that cannabis businesses only could exist in commercial or central mixed use zones, it left a handful of areas where they could locate.

That didn't stop three dispensaries — Kind Leaf

Pendleton, Pendleton Cannabis and High Desert Cannabis — from opening their doors in 2017, the first year legal marijuana sales were allowed in Pendleton.

Thur's Smoke Shop tried to join their ranks the same year, but the site the business was targeting on Southwest Tutuilla Creek Road ran into opposition from members of the neighborhood and the Pendleton School District, which objected to the proposed dispensary's proximity to school bus stops and student walking routes. The owner of Thur's eventually pulled his application, found a different property on Southeast Court Avenue and opened the dispensary in 2019.

While Pendleton could have five cannabis dispensaries in the near future, the city remains one of the few communities in Eastern Oregon that allows for legal marijuana sales.

On the same night voters in Pendleton gave cannabis sales the green light, Hermiston and Milton-Freewater residents voted to maintain their bans. The rest of Umatilla County's city and county governments kept their prohibitions in place as well through council or board action. Today, Pendleton is not only the sole city with legal marijuana sales in Umatilla County, but the nearest place to buy legal weed for many residents in neighboring Union and Morrow counties.

The planning commission will hold a public hearing on the proposed dispensary on Nye Avenue at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 24, in the city council chambers at Pendleton City Hall, 500 S.W. Dorion Ave. The meeting also can be accessed online through Zoom by visiting bit.ly/3189uDd.

Construction business owner joins packed commissioner race

East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — The race for Umatilla County Board of Commissioners Position 1 continues to grow ahead of the March 8 filing deadline.

On Tuesday, Feb. 15, Bob Barton of Hermiston joined a field that already included four other candidates. Barton is the owner of Barton Laser Leveling, a construction business that specializes in land clearing, excavation, demolition and site preparation. A graduate of Hermiston High School, Barton holds an associate's degree from the Oregon Institute of Technology.

The Position 1 seat is open after incumbent Commissioner George Murdock decided to retire. Prior to Barton joining the race, four other candidates already filed for the position: Jesse Bonifer of Athena, the

owner of Advanced Tarps and Covers and an Athena city councilor; Susan Bower of Pendleton, the owner of Eastern Oregon Business Source; Cindy Timmons of Milton-Freewater, a co-owner of Marv's Glass Shop; and Alvin Young of Hermiston, the manager of Elmer's Irrigation.

The only other county office up for election in 2022 is Position 2 on the board of commissioners, where incumbent Commissioner John Shafer is running against conservative activist HollyJo Beers. If no other candidates join the race for Position 2, Shafer and Beers won't appear on the ballot until the Nov. 8 general election. For Position 1, all candidates will compete for the top two spots during the May 17 primary. Regardless of the results, the top vote-getters will advance to a November runoff.

LOCAL BRIEFING

\$600k approved for motel renovation project

PENDLETON — The Pendleton Development Commission is officially an investor in the MotoLodge project.

In an interview after the Tuesday, Feb. 15 meeting, Charles Denight, the development's commis-

sion's associate director, said the commission approved applications from the Portland-based Cascadia Hospitality for a \$500,000 Rejuvenation grant and a \$100,000 Jump Start loan. Cascadia plans to use the money to renovate a vacant 40-room motel at 310 S.E. Dorion Ave., rechristening it as the MotoLodge.

The grant amount represents 40% of the proj-

ect's cost. The loan is expected to be paid back over the next three years at 3% interest.

Cascadia, which operates similar hotels in Portland, Bend and Hood River, is planning a quick turnaround on the renovation. Cascadia plans to reopen the motel by Memorial Day in the hopes of attracting lodgers ahead of Pendleton's summer events season.

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