

Fire:

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affected and will do what we can to help them find other employment," the letter stated.

Nictakis ended the letter with thanks to local businesses and government representatives for their support.

"Please continue to put our Shearer's Hermiston family in your thoughts through this difficult time," Nictakis stated.

Dealing with the fallout

This is a situation that has driven people to tears, according to Mark Gomolski, Agape House director.

Gomolski said Shearer's supplied Agape House with a list of all of the Hermiston plant employees, and the nonprofit held a food drive Friday, March 4, for them. Gomolski said CAPECO — Community Action Program of East Central Oregon — and the Oregon Food Bank supplied the food for the employees.

Large pallets of food lined the west end of the building going around to the east end on March 4, Gomolski said. The Shearer workers arrived at the Agape House, opened their vehicles and had them filled, he said.

There were 35 volunteers, Gomolski said, and seven of the volunteers came from Shearer's.

The event, which was 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., provided food to 127 Shearer's families, he said. Many of these people seemed very upset, Gomolski said.

"There were people crying as they were getting



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian, File

Shearer's Foods, a major employer in Hermiston, was virtually unrecognizable Feb. 23, 2022, following the explosion and fire Feb. 22.

food here," he said.

Gomolski said there is a possibility of holding another food drive in April.

Job fair coming next week

Since the start of the fire, local government has been in communication with Shearer's to see what can be done. Mark Morgan, Hermiston assistant city manager, is one of those officials who has expressed a desire to help.

"We've been in coordination with the Shearer's folks, as well as all of our other partners here on the state, local and federal level," he said.

Morgan said the city has been working with the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce on its planned job fair. He said planning for the fair was delayed while waiting to find out whether Shearer's would hold onto its employees and rebuild. Now that Shearer's released those employees, the city and the chamber is pushing forward with the job fair.

"I've been in touch with

all the wonderful companies in Hermiston," Val Hoxie, executive director of the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce, said, as she helped organize the fair.

On the afternoon of March 8, she said 14 employers confirmed participation at the fair, and she said she expects more to join. Some participating companies, which will be looking for new employees, are Lamb Weston, Amazon, Tillamook, Rogers Toyota of Hermiston and Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla.

The job fair is March 16, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Hermiston Community Center, 415 S. Highway 395.

Hoxie said Workforce will be present, too, as representatives will be on hand to answer questions about unemployment issues.

Employees enter a strong job market

Former Shearer's workers may not be looking long for work, according to Craig

Smith of Food Northwest.

He said Food Northwest did not have an association with Shearer's. It does, however, have connections with several other local food processors around the region. Already, he said, he has heard a lot of eagerness in hiring the Shearer's workforce.

"We have a lot of companies in that area that are looking for people," he said, including Lamb Weston, Port of Morrow, Boardman Foods, Tillamook and Oregon Potato.

"There are some really large companies out there that are literally begging for employees," he said.

He said the misfortune of losing jobs could become opportunities for people to find something new and better.

Hermiston looks to the future

Morgan expressed confidence the displaced laborers would find new work at the upcoming fair.

"I know there's been significant interest from employers looking to hire some of these folks coming out of the Shearer's facility," Morgan said.

The assistant city manager also articulated his belief the community will recover.

"We're strongly committed to making sure that we can see some reinvestment here in the community and that type of operation here as quickly as possible," he said.

He also plugged Hermiston as an excellent place for business.

"I think it's proven that our region has some of the best workforce," he said, "as well as assets in the form of water and utilities needed for processing operations."

Unlocking:

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"The building actually used to be a bank in the early 1900s," he said. "It's been a bank, a post office, stuff like that. There's still original bank vaults in there: back behind my bar, there is the original bank vault door and everything on it. So I just decided that kind of theme."

The Vault Tavern was born.

It's had its stops and starts, but The Vault has been open for about a year-and-a-half on Pilot Rock's Main Street. Saling first held the grand opening in November 2020 during a lull in the coronavirus pandemic. The Vault was only open for two weeks before the virus surged back and forced him to close until February 2021.

Unlike many other restaurant and bar owners, Saling's experience isn't in the dining industry. Most days, Saling goes to work at Keystone RV Co. in Pendleton and then returns home in the evening to manage The Vault with the help of a couple of employees.

While The Vault has been open and operating for more than a year, it's still not fully realized. The bar only serves beer, but Saling is hopeful he'll be able to get a kitchen operational in a few months that will serve favorite bar fare, including burgers, wings and pizza to go

along with the beer.

Saling said business tailed off a little after some initial excitement, but he's confident he'll find the customer base he needs once the kitchen opens and he's able to secure a license to serve hard liquor.

"Most people, I think they just got used to drinking at home," he said. "Anybody can buy a beer and just crack a beer at their house. Once I get the hard alcohol, mixed drinks and stuff like that, stuff people don't want to make necessarily at their own house, I'm feeling it will pick up."

Saling said he's already heard from residents and tourists coming through town on Highway 395 that they would return once Saling expanded his services.

Saling is working to turn The Vault into a successful business, but there's hope it could be a part of a larger economic revival for Pilot Rock.

Two dollar store chains — Family Dollar and Dollar General — are building new locations in a town that lost more than 10% of its population from 2010 to 2020. Next door to The Vault, Saling is renting out space to a hunting store, a business a friend of his runs.

Saling is bullish on Pilot Rock's future, noting the city is on the hunt for larger employers to take advantage of its acres of open land. And if the city is able to land any of those businesses, it could mean more patrons for The Vault.

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Races:

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Rick Pullen, a former Umatilla County employee, filed a last-minute challenge to incumbent Commissioner John Shafer. In 2018, Pullen ran against Murdock for Position 1. He came in second during the primary and narrowly lost in the runoff 50-48.

Shafer's other challenger is conservative activist HollyJo Beers, who also is making her second attempt at county office. Beers came in second during the 2020 primary for an open Position 3 seat, but she ended up losing the runoff to Dan Dorran.

Regardless of the results during the primary, the two candidates who get the most votes in each commission race will advance to a Nov. 8 runoff.

Hermiston City Council

Hermiston voters will have a choice in all but one race in May, but as of 5 p.m. on March 8, the one exception is set to be decided by write-in votes.

The race for Ward 1 will feature a rematch between incumbent Lori Davis and retiree Jackie Linton. Linton also was a candidate for Ward 1 in 2018, but she narrowly missed the runoff and Davis would go on to prevail in the general election.

Ward 2 Councilor Roy Barron is facing a challenge from Stan Stradley, the executive director of the Umatilla County Housing Authority. Barron first won office in 2018.

In Ward 4, former Councilor David McCarthy is challenging incumbent Phillip Spicerkuhn to rejoin the council. Spicerkuhn won a special election unopposed in March 2021 to represent Ward 4 on the council.

Ward 3 has been represented by Councilor Jackie Myers for nearly 30 years, but neither Myers nor any other candidates filed for the seat. The city of Hermiston's website did include a note that intended to update its candidate page on March 9 and it could include new filings.

Rounding out the slate of Hermiston elections is the race for municipal court

judge, where incumbent Thomas Creasing will face a challenge from Municipal Judge Pro Tem Cameron Bendixsen.

Pendleton City Council

When the Pendleton City Council looked to appoint someone to fill a vacant at-large seat in 2020, nine people applied for the position.

But securing at least five votes on the council is much easier than campaigning for hundreds of votes from the public, and 2022 will feature no competitive elections.

No races will be forced to rely on write-in votes, but only one candidate will be featured in each election. Incumbents Carole Innes of Ward 1, McKennon McDonald of Ward 2 and Linda Neuman of Ward 3 all filed for reelection without any challengers.

Back in 2020, Steve Campbell was the candidate who emerged from the nine-person field to win appointment to the council. Because of the timing of Campbell's appointment, the seat is up for election in 2022 and 2024. Campbell filed to stay on the council while the other at-large seat is being sought by newcomer Addison Schulberg, a manager at the Great Pacific Wine & Coffee Co. Schulberg is looking to replace Jake Cambier, who is retiring from the council.

Levy draws challenger

Most races for state offices that represent Umatilla and Morrow counties will not be competitive, but state Rep. Bobby Levy of Echo is facing a challenge in the Republican primary.

Skye Farnam, a Summer-ville business owner, is seeking to oust Levy. Farnam ran for the District 58 seat in 2018 as an independent but lost to then-incumbent Greg Barreto.

State Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, the incumbent in District 57, is all but assured another term in Salem after drawing no Republican or Democratic opponents.

In Umatilla County Circuit, Position 2 Judge Jon Lieuallen and Position 3 Judge Daniel Hill are running unopposed. And in Morrow County, District Attorney Justin Nelson also is running unopposed.

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