

# Baker Boyer Bank to permanently close M-F branch

By HECTOR DEL CASTILLO  
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

**MILTON-FREEWATER** — Two months after a water pipe burst and flooded the building, Baker Boyer Bank has announced it will permanently close the Milton-Freewater branch at 320 N. Columbia St.

June 17 will be the last day for the Milton-Freewater branch and its cash machine, the announcement on March 14 stated.

Extensive structural repairs have yet to begin, according to company President and CEO Mark Kajita, but the decision to fold the branch stem more from their industry transforming in the age of digital banking.

Fewer and fewer people actually set foot inside a bank nowadays, diminishing the need to invest company resources in maintaining several different brick-and-mortar facilities, he said.

“One of the things we’ve seen as a trend going back the last decade has been fewer in-person banking transactions through our entire branch system,” Kajita said. “We’ve seen more and more people really embrace the mobile app and digital banking they can do on their laptop. That’s caused in-person transactions to go down dramatically — and the pandemic sped that up.”

Clients with a safe deposit box inside the Milton-Freewater bank now can relocate them, at no cost, to any of the other six Baker Boyer branches.

There are no plans to close any of the other branches at this time, the company stated.

No layoffs will result from the Milton-Freewater closure, with employees already having been reassigned to other locations.

Meanwhile, news of the closure has caused some alarm among account holders.

“Most were just wonder-



Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin, File

**Two of about 20 fans dry water from a burst pipe Jan. 4, 2022, at the Milton-Freewater branch of Baker Boyer Bank. The bank is closing the branch permanently effective June 17.**

ing if they have to do anything to keep their account,” Kajita said of the 60 calls the bank received as of March 15, a day after the permanent closure was announced. “Do they need to do anything, or are there any fees — things like that. Most were understanding of why this is happening.

“Everybody’s sad about it, and that includes us, but it’s

really just part of the evolution of the banking industry.”

Digital banking is the future. An increasing number of everyday banking tasks, such as deposits and transfers, are possible for account holders at all hours, at their convenience, through their personal computers and mobile devices.

The rise of cashless payments has lessened trips to

the bank for withdrawals.

“Prior to digital banking, a lot of the transactions people would come into the bank for would be depositing checks into their personal accounts,” Kajita said. “But now that can be done on a mobile app. It’s caused a lot of people, especially younger people, to stop coming in. I think if you asked someone of Gen Z or the millennial generation when was the last time they set foot inside a bank, most would tell you it was a long time ago.”

It’s gotten to the point where more banks now are going digital-only, but Kajita insisted Baker Boyer has no plans to ever abandon all of its establishments — not after 152 years in the Walla Walla Valley.

“That’ll never be the case with Baker Boyer,” he said. “We like working with our clients in person. That’s something we really value.”

But closing the Milton-Freewater branch was a business

decision, Kajita said. Instead of shouldering the cost to repair and maintain a building used by fewer and fewer people, Baker Boyer looks to shift its time, money and staff toward more urgent needs.

“We’ve decided to ramp up how we assist entrepreneurs,” Kajita said. “It’s a complicated time with all the new technology and the accounting law, so we’ve decided to invest in experts of these new venues, new avenues of entrepreneurial business ... that’s going to take a lot of our resources.”

In the meantime, the Milton-Freewater building remains property of Baker Boyer Bank as the company awaits an insurance report.

“There’s still some extensive wood damage and repairs necessary to the flooring,” Kajita said. “Overall, we haven’t made any decision yet. We might end up looking for an entrepreneurial business that can take the building and call it their own.”

## Umatilla County voters get choices in only a few races this May

East Oregonian

**UMATILLA COUNTY** — Outside of the races for Hermiston City Council and the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners, there won’t be much choice on Umatilla County residents’ May 17 ballots.

Umatilla County Elections Division recently released a list of all candidates who filed for races that will appear on county ballots.

In Milton-Freewater, city council incumbents Steve Irving and Wes Koklich are the only candidates in the at-large races while Ward 1 Councilor John Lyon also is running unopposed. A similar trend happened in Pendleton, where all five city council seats up for election attracted only

one candidate, all but assuring a free pass to new, four-year terms.

It was a different story in Hermiston: all but one city council race is contested and the municipal judge race also will have a competitive election. The only uncontested race is in Hermiston’s Ward 3, where incumbent Jackie Myers’ last-minute entry ensured the race wouldn’t go to a write-in vote.

The race for two seats on the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners also is packed and no one dropped out before the deadline. The race for Position 1, a seat Commissioner George Murdock is vacating, has six candidates, while Position 2 Commissioner John Shafer is facing a challenge from two other candidates.

A couple of city electorates also will be asked to vote on tax issues.

In Milton-Freewater, the city is proposing a tax that would levy an estimated 32-cent per \$1,000 in assessed property value to raise \$500,000 for park repairs. Projects would include repairs or replacements at the Joe Humbert Aquatic Center, Yantis Park and the municipal golf course.

In Helix, the parks and recreation district is asking voters to approve an estimated 37-cent per \$1,000 tax to raise \$1 million over 21 years or less. The money would go toward building a new pool, splash pad and pump house in addition to making repairs and improvements to the bathhouse and bathrooms.

## Morrow County School District announces new superintendent

By ERICK PETERSON  
East Oregonian

**MORROW COUNTY** — Mathew Combe will be the new superintendent of the Morrow County School District effective July 1 as soon as the school board gives its approval.

The district office announced the decision to hire Combe in a Friday, March 18, press release.

“After an exhaustive search, the Morrow County School District Board of Directors is pleased to announce that Mr. Mathew Combe will become the district’s next superintendent,” according to the press release.

This announcement came as good news to the current superintendent, Dirk Dirksen.

“Mat Combe has been a long time Morrow County administrator,” Dirksen said. “He’ll do a real good job.”

Combe was among 13 applicants for the position, the press release stated, and the only local candidate among three finalists.

In the past week, Combe and other finalists “spent time in the district meeting with staff, community members and high school students from each of the three high schools,” according to the press release. Board members “conducted extensive refer-

ence checks and final interviews before offering Combe the position.”

Following this decision, the Morrow County School District is negotiating with Combe over his new contract and is looking to approve the deal at the April 11 board meeting.

Combe, the Heppner Junior/Senior High School principal, serves the school district as the director of maintenance and facilities. The district hired him in January 2005. In more recent years, he has served as elementary school principal and the director of alternative education.

Dirksen said the selection of Combe will “help in the transition,” as Combe is someone who knows the district well. People also know Combe, Dirksen said, and other people within the district will find it easy to work with him.

The step from principal to superintendent is something of which Dirksen is familiar. He said he already has spoken with the incoming superintendent about what this promotion will entail.

“I was the building principal at Riverside (Junior/Senior High School) before I started the job 11 years ago, and I went over some of the things that I did to prepare myself,” Dirksen said.

Now, he added, he is working together with Combe to ready him to be superintendent.

One of the big things ahead, Dirksen said, is a school bond, which will be on the May 17 ballot. The first of the county’s school bonds in more than two decades, it would give an upgrade to the district’s schools. If passed, it would raise \$138 million, to be supplemented with another \$4 million from the Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching Program.

“Combe has been actively involved in the entire bond process and looks forward to utilizing his knowledge as the district moves forward with hopes of passing their bond,” the press release states.

As important as this bond is, though, Dirksen said it is not the only concern for Combe, who will need to “build background” on the position.

He will need to learn more about the ins and outs of the superintendent’s job, Dirksen said.

“There is a difference between being a building administrator on a day-to-day basis and being a superintendent,” Dirksen said. “I know that was a very important thing for me to learn.”

Dirksen said his last day as Morrow County schools boss is June 30.

### LOCAL BRIEFING

#### Morrow County shooting suspect gets murder charge

**HEPPNER** — Shooting suspect Caleb Beehler is on the hook for second-degree murder in Morrow County.

The district attorney’s office Friday, March 18, arraigned Beehler, 39, on the lone charge following a grand jury indictment in the shooting death of Richard Broadbent, 58, according to court records.

Law enforcement was looking for Beehler in the wake of the killing March 9 in northern Morrow County. He turned himself in at the Hermiston Police Department on March 10.

Defense attorney Dean Gushwa of Pendleton represents Beehler, according to court records, and his next court date is March 31 for a status check that could include setting a bail hearing.

District Attorney Justin Nelson asked the court to seal all warrants, the applications

for a search warrant and affidavit in support of the search warrant to anyone except Beehler’s attorney.

“Disclosure of the information in the warrants, applications for search warrant and affidavit in support of search warrants could compromise an ongoing investigation in that witnesses, friends, or family members of said suspect(s), might destroy evidence, coordinate their stories or even flee the jurisdiction,” according to Nelson’s motion. Circuit Judge Dan Hill granted the request.

#### PAWS loses in Furry 4 round of March Muttess

**PENDLETON** — The Pioneer Humane Society/Pendleton Animal Welfare Shelter lost Saturday, March 19, in the Furry 4 round of March Muttess, but the organization still barked plenty loud.

The local nonprofit in the round raised \$6,246.44,

according to the fundraising tournament, but the Hermitage No-Kill Cat Shelter and Sanctuary in Tucson, Arizona, brought in \$6,438.75 and advanced to the championship.

While PAWS fell less than \$200 short of advancing to the big fundraising face off, it still raised more in the Furry 4 than in any other round of the tournament.

“Thank you so much for all of your support during #MarchMuttess!,” PAWS stated on its Facebook page.

Throughout the tournament, which mirrors March Madness in college basketball, PAWS raised \$15,625 for its shelter animals.

PAWS also congratulated Hermitage and Oneida County Humane Society of Rhinelander, Wisconsin, the two shelters vying for the title in the March Muttess Championship.

PAWS also stated competing with the shelters from all around the country was an honor.

—EO Media Group



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