

Merkley: ‘We need to provide a lot of support for rural housing’

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the state that were hit hard by the Bootleg Fire. Still, it's a matter of when, not if, a fire breaks out and threatens Eastern Oregon's landscape.

“It is essential to recognize that with the drought, the warmer temperatures and the longer season that we're going to see a lot of problems, and we need to prepare wherever we can,” Merkley said. “Particularly we need to focus on areas close to towns because if that forest is treated, maybe we can stop the fire before it gets to a town or city.”

Of those options, Merkley said he was working toward training National Guard members to assist fire chiefs, as well as fighting for better pay for fire teams to combat high turnover. Merkley also said that his team was trying to see if “fire teams can be hired to do forest management work when they're not fighting fires so they can have year-round work.”

Closely related to the fire season is the ongoing drought. The senator said that the irrigation district's top goal has been to improve the efficiency of their distribution systems across Oregon.

“I have worked to get about \$130 million in Oregon for piping for irrigation systems,” Merkley said. “Obviously, the task of piping is much larger than that, but that is still a huge effort of an unusual possi-



Mike McMillan/U. S. Forest Service

The sun sets in the summer of 2021 over a stand of burned trees from the Bootleg Fire in the Fremont-Winema National Forest. Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley in March 2021 spoke about the need to address forest resiliency and management in Eastern Oregon, and has announced a \$1.8 million grant project for precommercial thinning, fuels reduction, prescribed burning and mowing to reduce wildfire risk.

bility for that much funding to help irrigation districts. (We've) really been focused on that program.”

Merkley also said that he was looking into agricultural research related to how to grow crops that are better in drier environments.

“The agricultural research station is doing a

lot more work on how to conserve water in La Grande for our dry wheat farming, and what versions of wheat will do better in drier conditions,” he said.

Access to internet and housing

Among those infrastructure projects are increased

access to broadband internet in rural areas that have relied on satellite internet connections. An increasing number of companies are installing fiber-optic cables, but those solutions can be expensive and have a low return on investment for network providers if they lay a line to rural areas outside of

a municipality. A proposed solution, Merkley said, could be in newly developed microwave repeater networks and technology that keeps information signals terrestrial.

“Laying fiber becomes too expensive for just a couple of houses,” Merkley said. “Many counties are designing their system using

microwave relays, which unlike satellites, can carry a much higher bandwidth at lower cost.”

He also touched on the growing housing crisis and how it impacts rural Oregonians who are getting priced out of the real estate market, or are facing homelessness as rents and real estate prices continue to increase. Those real estate changes have also hurt the economy as businesses struggle to attract workers in areas where housing costs have far outpaced wages.

“Almost every community is wrestling with many aspects of housing. From housing homeless individuals to services related to some kind of addiction or to mental health, or the fact that it's getting too expensive for middle-class Americans to buy homes, or there's just no homes built,” Merkley said. “There's no easy solution. We need to provide a lot of support for rural housing.”

Build Back Better

Noting the omnibus infrastructure spending plan approved by the Senate, the Build Back Better act, Merkley said he is fighting to get projects approved in rural areas of the state.

“The question is how many applications can we get in,” he said. “I'm going to fight to get those applications funded, and we're hoping there will be projects throughout rural Oregon as a result of the infrastructure bill.”



Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

The afternoon Alaska Airlines flight sits outside the Walla Walla Regional Airport on Friday, April 1, 2022.

Airport:

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It will also offer Wi-Fi and inflight streaming of movies and television shows.

The new jets will be faster, 20,000 pounds heavier and will continue to serve the same flight destinations as the Q-400 as a regional carrier.

The E-175 is produced by the Brazilian aerospace manufacturer Embraer and started commercial flights in 2005.

Designed for short to mid-range flights, the E-175 has a cruising speed of 495 mph with a flight range of 1,800 miles. It can climb to 41,000 feet and is 104 feet in length with a 94-foot wingspan.

By comparison, the Q-400 has a shorter range of 1,114 miles, a lower cruising altitude of 25,000 feet and a cruising speed of 400 mph, almost 100 mph slower than the E-175.

The E-175 will get passengers to and from their destinations faster and more efficiently, the company said. Part of that efficiency comes from the wingtip design that improves fuel economy and reduces carbon emissions by over 6%, Alaska Air has stated.

Terminal remodeling

The aircraft fleet change to the Embraer 175 is part of the airport's larger master plan, according to a statement from the Port of Walla Walla.

Airport Manager Jennifer Skoglund says the master plan has been preparing the airport to accommodate this type of aircraft, and they will be remodeling the facilities and making infrastructure improvements before the switch.

“We have been upgrading our pavement and runways to meet current (Federal Aviation Administration) standards,” Skoglund said. “We

have positioned ourselves to accommodate larger aircraft so the transition will be seamless.”

One element of the master plan will be remodeling the terminal area and enlarging the holding area where passengers wait for boarding. Offices will also be remodeled.

Some areas in the terminal will be expanded and will have glass walls to better accommodate Transportation Security Administration. More room will also be needed for large screening tools used by TSA to check passengers.

“This is part of the standards the FAA has set for every airport, not just ours,” Skoglund said. “The new design will help with better social distancing, expand a larger seating and waiting area and keep us in compliance with the FAA.”

The standards set by the federal agency are designed to help slow the spread of COVID-19, among other concerns.

The terminal remodel project cost is estimated at \$4 million, with nearly half of those funds coming from federal coronavirus aid.

Skoglund estimates that the remodeling could be completed by the end of 2022 but most likely will be into early 2023 if not longer.

The time frame for the transition from the Q-400 to the E-175 is not set, but Skoglund thinks a mid-to-late-2023 launch is possible.

“We are moving forward on the engineering design process for the terminal,” she said. “It is still in the very beginning stages, so there is not a lot of information yet. We are just getting going on it.”

When asked about the revolving door entrance into the terminal, Skoglund said she is certain it will be upgraded too.

“The revolving door will most likely be removed.”

Fire:

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“In the past five years, Oregon OSHA has conducted four inspections of this site, two of which resulted in citations. One of the citations followed an accident investigation,” Corvin said.

In one of the cases, he said, the employer initially filed an appeal of the citation but then later withdrew the appeal.

Missing safety meetings were among the causes for citation.

Complaints of safety problems

Dean said he brought up major safety hazards to the directors of the company while working at Shearer's.

“I couldn't get anywhere with management,” he said. “They were spending millions on production and innovation, but they were spending nothing on the safety department. Whereas they had an astronomical production budget, we had roughly just enough to pay for personal protection equipment.”

Dean described his employment as “working from nothing” and “building a grassroots program when there was nothing to work with.” He said he quit out of frustration. An “agent of change in the industry,” he said he has long worked to fix safety issues at different companies. After working with Shearer's, he felt he could not improve safety, as he could



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian

Equipment was in place Monday, April 4, 2022, to remove sections of debris from the destroyed Shearer's Foods plant in Hermiston.

not encourage management to prioritize safety.

“It was a direct problem of management, in my opinion,” Dean said, “in how they viewed and prioritized and felt toward the safety of the employees at the plant.”

He said he repeatedly brought up safety concerns to senior management, but to no avail. Not only did managers fail to make changes, they dismissed his recommendations entirely.

“Their direct, verbatim, response to me when I raised these safety concerns was to ‘calm my tits; they've been doing this for 40 years.’ That's the phrase they used,” he said.

Meanwhile, Dean said, the company was neglecting envi-

ronmental regulations, too.

The one thing he said he was able to do was to create an active evacuation plan, something the company lacked prior to his employment. He said he also organized evacuation drills.

“It was difficult to do, because it affected production,” he said.

He added there were additional concerns, especially when it came to the treatment of workers.

“They'd work people till they couldn't work anymore,” he said. This was a safety concern, he said, because exhausted workers would intentionally break lock-out-tagout safety rules. Having broken these rules,

management would punish them with three-day suspensions.

“It was motivation for them to take their breaks,” Dean stated.

He said his co-workers would regularly point out their own infractions, just to be sent home for rest or to attend a funeral or some other necessary event.

Answers forthcoming

Goff, while working on the site for the fire district, said investigators should be able to remove the roof from an area they wish to study soon, barring weather delays. Then, they should be able to have answers for the explosion by late this week, he said.

Uber:

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drivers weren't happy with the deal, staff prepared to have the city council vote on the issue at the April 5 meeting.

But sometime before the meeting, Uber contacted the city to let staff know it objected to the proposed ordinance.

“They are not open to the possibility of working or operating their business on a limited-hours basis,” she said. “I think it's something they just don't do. We're not a big enough component that they would consider doing it for us.”

Kerns said she wanted to write a new ordinance with Uber's input and was confident she could negotiate with the corporation herself, but wanted guidance from the

council first. She added the new ordinance would allow Uber, and other ride-hail services including Lyft, to operate in the city 24-hours per day as a part of a pilot program.

Mayor John Turner recounted the stakes of the issue. While Elite may hold the status as the only taxi service in town, it also fills a crucial role in the city's public transportation services, holding a contract to operate transportation programs for senior, disabled and low-income residents. The pilot program would allow the city to study whether Elite could coexist with ride-hails and generate enough revenue to continue fulfilling its contractual obligation to the city.

“Right now, Uber has no responsibilities to the city,” Turner said. “But Elite Taxi does.”

There was no public hearing attached to the coun-

cil discussion, but audience members used the public comment section of the meeting to voice their views on the issue. Some speakers said they used the city's taxi ticket program, which was integral for them to get to medical appointments. Others connected to the local tourism industry said Pendleton should allow Uber and other ride-hailing services because visitors increasingly expected them.

Kerns said she expected to introduce the new ordinance at the city council's next meeting on April 19. She also intended to request the council hold a first reading and public hearing on the same night, allowing the council to pass the ordinance immediately.

The council requested Kerns set the length of the trial period at five months, which would extend the pilot program past the Round-Up.

While the council took no

action, it did vote on several other issues.

• The council unanimously voted to raise water rates, sewer rates and the street utility fee by 3.3%. Public Works Director Bob Patterson said the utility rates and fees are usually tied to a price index, but the high rate of inflation meant if the council didn't take action, the rates were set to rise by 6.7%. A couple of residents spoke against the rate increase, arguing that Pendleton's utility rates already were too high and didn't compare favorably with other communities in the region.

• The council also unanimously agreed to spend \$33,442 to expand the water line to the future Pendleton Children's Center, 510 S.W. 10th St. The move will allow the nonprofit child care center to install fire suppression sprinklers at the old Pendleton senior center ahead of its planned opening in the fall.