

MORROW COUNTY

Candidates address Amazon money at forum

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HEPPNER — Morrow County commissioner candidates during a forum Tuesday, April 19, touched on several issues, including the distribution of revenue from Amazon and a pay bump for commissioners.

The five candidates are vying for two seats on the county board.

The candidates

Jeff Wenholtz is challenging Commissioner Melissa Lindsay for Position 2, which opened because Commissioner Don Russell is retiring. Lindsay holds the Position 3 seat, but her move to seek the open seat means No. 3 also is open, and three candidates are in that race: Guss Peterson, Mike McNamee and David Sykes.

All five met for the forum, which the Heppner Chamber of Commerce organized at the Gilliam Brisbee Building in Heppner.

Wenholtz said his experience has prepared him to be a commissioner. He graduated from Riverside High School in Boardman, helped his father run Irrigon Motors and Irrigon Mini Storage and served on the Morrow County Solid Waste Advisory Committee and the Morrow County Planning Commission, among other groups.

Lindsay, a fifth-generation farmer, who attended Heppner High School, spoke of her family's Morrow County roots. Her grandfather, Gar Swanson, was a founding member of the Bank of Eastern Oregon and helped start the Port of Morrow. Lindsay has served on the county board since 2016.

Peterson said he is a fifth-generation wheat farmer who went to school in Lone and studied political science

REGISTER TO VOTE

Voters have until Tuesday, April 26, to update their registration, including any address changes. To do that online, visit the Oregon Secretary of State website at sos.oregon.gov/Pages/index.aspx and click on the "Register to Vote" link.

at Oregon State University. He said he was "the youngest person here by a number of years" but he is running in his ideas and integrity.

Sykes talked up his life experiences. He served in the Navy, attended the University of Oregon, met his wife, has operated businesses and owns the Heppner Gazette-Times.

McNamee said he "comes from a whole different angle from everybody else here." While he is an Oregonian like the other candidates, he has lived in big cities and has the benefit of knowing rural and urban communities. A businessman and rancher, he said he is "pretty conservative."

Answering questions

Candidates fielded questions on a number of topics, most coming from the forum moderator, including about the county's growth and each candidate's vision in the next 10 years.

Wenholtz said county policy should be good partners with the state and the Port of Morrow. Lindsay spoke of the need to consider health and other needed services.

Peterson said he was focused on housing, education and energy projects. Sykes spoke of jobs and employment diversity. McNamee said the county needs limited growth that does not outpace our infrastructure.

The distribution of money from Amazon to cities in the county raised some criticism from the candidates.

Wenholtz said "the communities that got it probably enjoyed the money" but it was not distributed correctly.

Lindsay pointed out that there were many people who were not included in the distribution, as they do not live in a city.

McNamee said the distribution of cash was "a tough decision" but that it should have been "put away" rather than spent. Peterson said the money should have gone elsewhere, too. Sykes pointed out this "gift" will never happen again, so the talk was only a "philosophical discussion."

One attendee, a rancher, asked the candidates about approving data centers and their responsibility to pay their share of taxes.

Lindsay said companies should be paying into the community, as they are community members. Wenholtz said the data centers have not been driving up power rates. Peterson spoke of lowering tax abatements now that infrastructure is in place. Sykes stated data centers should not be "let off the hook," and more questions should be asked. McNamee said "we've been too easy" on these companies.

Staffing problems at the county health department also is a concern.

Wenholtz spoke of the need for competitive pay, and Lindsay said she has experience in this issue and believes recruitment is part of the solution.

Peterson complained of the need to cut commissioners' checks and increasing nurse's pay. Sykes said further study is needed to find if local wages are worse than other counties. McNamee said money should be found in the budget, and the county should learn why

people are not working here.

That led into a focus on a raise for Morrow County commissioners.

Lindsay said wages are studied, and there is a need to make pay competitive. Wenholtz said commissioners should be part-time and see pay increases with the cost of living.

Peterson said a commissioner's pay should be tied to the median wage of the county. Sykes said the commissioner's pay increase is "not a done deal" and it can be overturned. McNamee called the pay increase "too much."

When it comes to tourism, Wenholtz said groups, such as local chambers, need to promote the area's natural beauty and added, trail development could be helpful. Lindsay said in addition to the areas' scenic views, there are excellent events and activities that can be expanded on. McNamee spoke of rivers, mountains and other features that could be promoted. Peterson stated port stations for electric cars and agritourism could help. And Sykes said local business is giving us good examples of success in promoting tourism.

Wrapping up

In closing statements, candidates each gave one final pitch.

Wenholtz brought up his experience, which has given him understanding of good governance. Lindsay said she is proud of her service as a commissioner and she wants to continue her hard work.

Peterson said he was "running to make a difference." Sykes said he has been to many commissioner meetings, and he will bring his experience to the office. McNamee said he is a community member who wants to help and that he wants big companies to pay their share.

Sudden wind storm wreaks havoc



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

High winds damaged the Hermiston Cinema sign along Highway 395 during a storm on Wednesday, April 20, 2022. Winds picked up from 0 at 6:50 p.m. to 33 mph at 6:53 p.m., gusting to 52 mph, according to National Weather Service observations. The sudden storm brought down branches all over town and stopped a Hermiston High School track meet where the Dawgs were hosting Walla Walla and Kamiakin.

PENDLETON

Uber has green light

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Uber has the green light to go in Pendleton.

The city council in a unanimous vote at its meeting Tuesday evening, April 19, approved a five-month long pilot program to allow ride-hailing services to operate in Pendleton along with taxis. Pendleton City Manager Robb Corbett said the program took effect immediately.

In most cases, the council has a first reading of a new ordinance, then at the next meeting has the second reading and public hearing before casting a vote. But for this matter, Corbett said, the council voted unanimously to call for the first and second readings at one meeting, then by unanimous vote held a public hearing and voted unanimously to approve the program.

Usually a new ordinance goes into effect 30 days after passage, he said, but this had an emergency clause that put the program into effect upon passage.

The vote came after weeks of contention and

discussion about allowing ride-hale services to operate in Pendleton. According to the staff report from city attorney Nancy Kerns and finance director and transportation administrator Linda Carter, Pendleton's ordinance is based upon similar ordinances a number of Oregon communities have adopted.

"There are no requirements for hours of operation and no regulation of fares," the memo states, and after five months the pilot program sunsets unless the council adopts it permanently.

When the window closes, according to the memo, the city council needs to determine whether the ordinance:

- Protects the public.
- Meets the transportation needs of the public, including having a viable contractor for city provided public transportation.
- Allows new modes of transportation services, which will not overwhelmingly compete with the city's transportation contractor, Elite Taxi.

And if the council does not take it up, Corbett said, it ends.

PORT OF MORROW

DEQ seeks public comments on water permit

BY ALEX BAUMHARDT
Oregon Capital Chronical

BOARDMAN — The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality is asking the public to weigh in on a revised water permit for the Port of Morrow after it violated its existing permit more than 1,100 times.

From 2018 to 2021, the state's second largest port dumped wastewater on farmland containing 165 tons more nitrate than the permit allowed.

In January, the DEQ fined the port nearly \$1.3 million for the violations. The port is appealing.

Nitrate is a compound in fertilizer used in farming. Many crops, including potatoes and wheat, are processed at the Port of Morrow before being shipped by river, rail and road. That processing puts remnants of fertilizer into the wastewater.

The port's water permit requires treatment of the wastewater before it is sold to nearby farms for irrigation. It is essentially a wastewater recycling program, but when that water is too high in nitrate from the fertilizer, the excess moves into the groundwater and can contaminate aquifers that local well users and water utilities depend on. The port produces about 3.6 billion gallons of wastewater annually.

Nitrate is difficult and expensive to remove from wells, requiring filters that cost thousands of dollars. If water with high levels of nitrate is consumed over long periods, it can lead to increased risk of colon and stomach cancer, according to the National Cancer Institute. Such pollution can also be harmful to babies and pregnant women, causing oxygen deprivation



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Flags flutter Jan. 11, 2022, at the entrance to the Port of Morrow Industrial Park, Boardman. The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality is seeking public comment on a revised water permit for the port after it violated its existing permit from 2018 to 2021, resulting in a fine of \$1.3 million from the DEQ.

that can lead to miscarriages and methemoglobinemia or "blue baby syndrome," according to the Oregon Health Authority.

Comments regarding the revised water permit can be emailed to Patty Isaak, DEQ's water quality permit coordinator at patty.isaak@deq.oregon.gov. All comments are due by 5 p.m. Friday, May 20.

After that round of

comments, the agency will propose an updated permit and possibly allow comment on that.

The port's discharge violations are the result of accumulating more water than it can store as it's expanded over the years.

The revised permit would allow the port to add about 1,600 acres to its discharge program.

"The additional acreage spreads out the wastewater nutrients onto more crop fields, reducing likelihood of unused nitrate leaching to groundwater if properly managed," the DEQ said in its permit summary.

The revisions would require the port to conduct more soil and groundwater quality monitoring, reduce discharges in nongrowing seasons and devise a plan to clean existing groundwater contamination.

The port is building the first of three anaerobic digesters that will help treat some of the water-borne nitrate turning it to ammonia, which is easier for crops to take up and could lead to less nitrate leaching into the groundwater.

Morrow County is the Lower Umatilla Basin, which the DEQ has deemed a Groundwater Management Area since the early 1990s due to high levels of nitrate in the water.

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