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BMCC

Faculty implore board to reject budget

 By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Faculty of Blue Mountain Community College, Pendleton, took a unified stance Monday, April 25, against the budget proposal calling for numerous layoffs and program cuts at the college.

The budget committee, though, held off on making any decision after meeting for the better part of three hours.

BMCC instructors gathered at the Pendleton campus before the committee discussed the college administration's proposal to eliminate 10 full-time teaching positions, several part-time positions in multiple disciplines and eliminating criminal justice, college prep and industrial systems technology programs. They had prepared statements to deliver to the committee, the rest of the college board and the administration. The East Oregonian obtained several of the statements.

Just getting into the boardroom took some effort. The college was not going to let instructors into the meeting. BMCC President Mark Browning in the hallway outside the room agreed faculty could go on one at a time to address the board. Math instructor Bob Hillenbrand went first.

He told the committee and Browning that a similar scenario played out in 2002-03, when Travis Kirkland was president of the college.

"Just like then, we're now hearing claims of the imminent demise of the college," Hillenbrand said, "a false pretext for radical action from someone who just arrived primed with an anti-faculty agenda."

But 20 years later, Blue Mountain continues operating. He warned this fight will end up in arbitration and the outcome will be the same as it was then. The college spent nearly \$500,000 fighting legal challenges during Kirkland's tenure, Hillenbrand said, and lost all of them.

"Don't waste precious college funds on lawyers," he urged.

Hillenbrand also said Browning was deceptive in his use of figures and obscured facts, such as the 39 classified and administration

See BMCC, Page A7


Members of the Corey family gather for their family council during the 2022 lambing at Cunningham Sheep Co. in Nolin between Pendleton and Echo.

Steve Corey/Contributed Photo

FAMILY FARM

Cunningham Sheep Co. gives term new meaning

 By SIERRA DAWN
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Capital Press

PENDLETON — Inside the Pendleton Woolen Mills retail store, shoppers oohed and aahed while fingering vibrantly colored clothing and blankets.

"I love people's reactions. That's the most gratifying thing about this work," said John Bishop, president of Pendleton Woolen Mills.

In the adjoining mill — run by generations of the same family since 1909 — skilled artisans worked alongside roaring machinery. Wool was carded, aligned into roving, wound onto spools, stretched and twisted into yarn on spinning frames and sent to looms to be woven into cloth.

Some of this wool came from Pendleton-based Cunningham Sheep Co., one of Oregon's largest and oldest family-run farms, with thousands of sheep plus cattle, timber, wheat and hunting grounds.

Those familiar with the farm say its success was built on more than just land and capital; it also was forged through five generations of family members, each contributing to the farm in different ways through a highly orchestrated business structure.

"We are truly a family ranch with almost a 100-year history in the same family, and to me, that's the most important thing, not so much how much sagebrush we've got," said Steve Corey, 75, a member of the family farm and who has served on the farm's board of directors.

Five generations

According to family records, the sheep business was founded by Charles Cunningham in 1873.

In 1933, Mac Hoke and his business partner, Don Cameron, acquired it. Cameron later sold to Hoke's family, in whose hands the farm has remained ever since.

Hoke and his wife, Carrie, the first generation, had two daughters: Joan and Helen, the second generation.

Joan married a Corey and Helen married a Levy.

Joan Hoke Corey had three children and Helen Hoke Levy had six — the third generation.

In the fourth generation, there are six Coreys and 17 Levys.

The fifth generation is comprised of around 30 children.

About 75% of the family has stayed in Eastern Oregon, and most family members — including the children — spend some time on the farm.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

A pair of Cunningham Sheep Co.'s 4-year-old Rambouillet rams.

Everyone has a voice

Industry leaders and community members say the farm's success is partly attributable to its structure, which strategically incorporates generations of family members.

Direct lineal descendants inherit interest in the company, but non-owners also play a role.

The family has two entities that contribute to the business: a family board and a family council.

The board includes eight family members and one independent director. Board members vote on business decisions. The current board has seven fourth-generation family members and one third-generation member. Older generations are transitioning out.

The family council is separate, existing to give everyone a voice. Spouses of lineal descendants are allowed to participate. Although council members don't get to vote on business decisions, the council keeps the family connected and is a "breeding ground for ideas," Steve Corey said.

On some family farms, only those who actually work the ground get an ownership stake and a say in how the farm is run, but that's not the case with Cunningham Sheep Co. This family encourages each generation to pursue their own career interests, on or off the farm, but to be part of the farm either way.

Some family members have chosen farm life, including Dick Levy, who manages cattle, and Bob Levy, who oversees sheep. Others have chosen off-farm occupations, including Steve Corey, who worked in the farm's wheat fields when he was young, studied history at Yale University and law at Stanford University, then returned to practice as an attorney in Eastern Oregon.

Both categories — those in full-time farming and those with

off-farm careers — participate in the family board and council, contributing their skills and knowledge to the farm.

Sharing responsibility between family members has kept the business in its best shape, said Corey, though it has demanded "a great deal of coordination and communication."

'Wool was king'

Early in the farm's history, Cunningham Sheep Co. had about 25,000 sheep, and the farm has a long history of selling its wool exclusively to Pendleton Woolen Mills.

"Back then, wool was king," said Glen Krebs, the farm's lead sheep herder.

As markets changed through the decades, Cunningham Sheep Co. whittled down its flock — the farm now keeps about 4,000 ewes, plus rams and lambs — and expanded into other commodities.

In the 1960s, the family added cattle and now raises 1,200 cow-calf pairs annually. The family also diversified by adding wheat, timberland and a hunting operation called Hunt Oregon LLC.

Since the 1950s, the farm has increased its acreage by 60% to 80%.

Steve Corey showed a map of the family's holdings: private land, timberlands and federal grazing lands extending across Umatilla County and parts of Morrow and Union counties. Corey estimated the farm is larger than 75,000 acres.

Although the farm now produces a diverse mix of livestock, wheat and timber, many locals still know Cunningham Sheep Co. best for what gave the farm its name: sheep.

Fine-wooled Rambouillets

Wool remains a major part of the farm 149 years after Cunningham started the business.

The Coreys and Levys raise

Rambouillet sheep, a large, white-faced breed that produces fine wool soft enough to be worn next to the skin.

"Shearing is a busy time," Krebs said.

He ascended a ramp to the upper story of a barn lined with shearing stations.

Annually, he said, the farm pays a shearing contractor to bring in several shearers.

Shearing is fast-paced. Shorn sheep are guided down chutes resembling slides at a park, while handlers classify the wool's quality before it's mechanically stuffed into bags.

When Krebs was growing up, his family stuffed round burlap bags, often 7 1/2 feet tall, with wool manually rather than mechanically.

"When I was little, they'd throw me in a bag and I'd have to work my way out," he said.

He chuckled.

Krebs is not part of either the Levy or Corey side. The family hired him because he has a lifetime of industry knowledge; Krebs' family also runs an Eastern Oregon sheep business.

The farm hired Krebs in 2013 after their former Basque lead sheep herder, Juan Erice, retired.

To the mill

Once wool is bagged, it's shipped to Pendleton Woolen Mills.

The mill and farm have a long-standing relationship built on trust. For decades, the mill has committed to buy the farm's wool at the best price it can afford to offer. Pendleton's wool buyer does a visual inspection, talks with the farm about the year's clip and negotiates a price.

"If you want to call it a handshake relationship, you can call it that," said Dan Gutzman, who manages Pendleton's wool buying department. "But it's one that's withstood (decades)."

Corey said Pendleton Woolen Mills has been loyal, buying the farm's wool even during difficult years.

Many factors drive the international wool market. Tariffs, disease outbreaks, drought and shipping congestion all impact pricing.

Pendleton Woolen Mills consumes about 2.4 million scoured pounds of wool annually — 40% from domestic growers, 60% from overseas — and Cunningham is one of the longest-standing suppliers.

Wool, however, isn't the farm's main money-maker. More profit comes from selling meat and breeding stock.

See Farm, Page A7


7 294671 10002 2