

Joseph council gets down to business

Establishes committees, hires, looks for new auditor

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — The Joseph City Council got down to its normal business, Thursday, June 3, following a second budget hearing and another executive session to deal with complaints of alleged harassment.

The council will hold what is expected to be its final budget hearing Thursday, June 10, at 5 p.m., with another meeting called for late this month to formally approve the 2021-22 budget.

Last week's executive session was primarily to explain procedures for handling complaints between city employees. Another such session will be scheduled once formal complaints are submitted to City Hall.

But the highlights of the regular session were Pro-Tem Administrator/Recorder Brock Eckstein making recommendations — that the council largely approved — for getting back on track to business as it should be. He noted he was brought in to help the city between permanent city managers and recommended things he's seen work in other cities.

Committee assignments

"Part of this plan of action is, madam mayor, I recommend setting committees that would consist of two councilors and two citizens and whatever lead or director is in charge of that specific area," Eckstein said addressing Mayor Belinda Buswell. "The main effort of this is to get the council more involved with what is going in the city because they haven't gotten a lot of information."

Eckstein said the committees would help councilors learn more about city operations and become more closely involved with them.

"For many years, there's been a big disconnect between City Hall and City Council," he said. "This has caused a lot of frustration on everyone's behalf. These committees are not where councilors show up and dictate to directors. They show up and advise and be present for issues that departments are having and I'll help offer solutions that might alleviate problems at that level."

He said the committees would report to the council and urged councilors to trust their colleagues that the proper solutions are being



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Joseph city Administrator/Recorder Pro-Tem Brock Eckstein, left, speaks as Mayor Belinda Buswell and Councilwoman Kathy Bingham listen Thursday, June 3, 2021, during a regular meeting of the council. Eckstein assured the public that he has no documented complaints of harassment by members of the City Council and then moved on to normal city business.

arrived at. He also suggested rotating membership on the committees every six months to a year.

"It's also my recommendation that councilors don't get too comfortable in their positions," he said, "so you can get used to every city function and learn how everything does operate."

Buswell immediately called for volunteers for various committees. They will be:

- The Administrative Committee: Councilors Kirsten Rohla and Stephen Bartlow, will work with Eckstein. He said the committee members would sign every single check that is written from city coffers to keep close tabs on city spending and its bank accounts, as well as assisting with missing policies and procedures.

- The Public Works Committee: Buswell and Councilor Kathy Bingham will work with Public Works Director Levi Tickner.

- Parks & Recreation/Main Street Committee: Councilors Lisa Collier and Tammy Jones will work with Parks & Rec/Main Street Director Dennis Welch.

- The Public Safety Committee: Councilors Bingham and Matt Soots will work with Fire Chief Jeffrey Weeks and an ordinance enforcement officer when that position is filled.

Each committee is expecting to include two volunteer residents. Eckstein addressed the audience of more than 40 people, seeking the volunteers.

He said he recalled his mother saying, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problems. So if any of you are interested in any of these committees, I'd encourage you to contact City Hall and fill out a committee application and help come up with some solutions that'll prevent some of these things from happening in the future."

Eckstein also urged bol-

stering the city's workforce.

"I've also identified a need for some more employees," he said, recommending another utility worker for Public Works and a billing worker for City Hall. He recommended councilors and department heads make up the hiring committees for the new positions.

Books 'out of whack'

Eckstein also recommended the council take bids on a new auditor for the city.

"There's been some issues with past budgets. I spent five hours at the CPA office this morning — and some of these budgets go back 10 years. There's been a lot of mistakes that have led to some financial difficulties," he said. "I think you guys did a fantastic street project. Your streets look amazing for a city this size. You couldn't afford it. That's evident by the fact that we're looking at moving money from the sewer and water fund to make a \$106,000 loan payment."

He said from looking at the city's books, they're full of discrepancies.

"I'm kind of trained to see that kind of stuff, but in my opinion, a professional auditor should've caught some of this stuff a long time ago," he said. "We're here today because this path wasn't corrected a long time ago. You've had such a high turnover of employees and administrators, one, because I think they are frustrated with these books because they're out of whack and, with the other issues at hand, some of them haven't even had a proper chance to address them. They haven't even had proper accounting software. I spent five hours a day developing a cash flow process with Excel spreadsheet. Whereas if we'd had Caselle installed, it's a one-minute report."

He emphasized that the problems with the books aren't new.

"It's not just recent; it goes a long way back," he said. "It's something that was out of line 10 years ago and it gets piled on, and it gets to where we are today."

Eckstein said the possibility of changing auditors should be considered regularly.

"It's a very good practice to, once every three years, review your attorney, your engineering firm, your auditors and consultants," he said. "It's not an insult against them, it's just good practice to make sure you're getting the best bang for your buck."

Other matters

In other matters, the council:

- Heard an update from Brad Baird, of Anderson Perry Engineers, on the city's projects for paving, its water system and sewer plant.

- Approved a request by the Joseph Chamber of Commerce for a street closure for Aug. 28 for the 32nd annual Wallowa Mountain Cruise car show. It will include local food vendors, church groups, 4-H & FFA.

- Approved a request by the Joseph Chamber of Commerce for a free concert by a local band either Aug. 23 or 24 — not both days — to be held in conjunction with Bicycle Rides Northwest, which is expecting about 300 participants.

- Agreed to street closures for Chief Joseph Days, which will be July 27-Aug. 1. In particular, the closures will be July 30 for the Kid-die Parade and July 31 for the Main Parade.

- Heard a report from Rohla on the Tech Committee that progress is being made both on the city's website and the sound equipment that will air and record city meetings.

- Heard a report from Collier that the Main Street Committee is planning a "walk-thru" downtown to determine needs there.



Ronald Bond/Wallowa County Chieftain

Representative Cliff Bentz, left, speaks during a meeting that included Wallowa and Union county commissioners Monday, June 7, 2021, in Island City.

Bentz meets with local elected leaders

By **RONALD BOND**
Wallowa County Chieftain

ISLAND CITY — Wallowa and Union county commissioners, educators and business owners heard about the inner workings of Washington, D.C., from 2nd Congressional District Rep. Cliff Bentz on Monday, June 7, in Island City, and had an opportunity to share thoughts and concerns on a range of topics with the freshman congressman.

Before fielding questions from the roughly 15 individuals in attendance — which included Wallowa County Commissioners John Hillock and Todd Nash — Bentz, who sits on both the Committee on Natural Resources and the Committee on the Judiciary, shared some of his experience from the first five months of his first term in office. He went into how the committees in Congress work — including some of what his role in the NRC entails — discussed the fickle nature of bipartisanship when it comes to issues, and said that even though representatives make \$174,000 when they first enter Congress, that is largely whittled away by taxes and Washington, D.C., rent, noting his rent in the city is \$3,400 per month. He also discussed the drought in the West, noting that "72 million" Americans would be impacted this year by the dry conditions, some more than others.

He then fielded questions and comments on education, taxes, the River Democracy Act, and what can be done about the current labor shortage, with the nation having millions of job openings but not enough citizens willing to fill the positions.

Hillock discussed Oregon cap-and-trade policy, and stated a concern that very few members of the current state government are paying attention to the issue.

"There's no senators, no representatives, virtually nobody is participating in the rule making, other than me and one other commissioner, and a city official in the Portland area," he said.

"What is your thought on how this is going to roll out? This is a billion-dollar thing, bigger than anything going on in the Legislature this year, and there isn't one politician keeping track of what's going on besides two commissioners. What's your thought on that?"

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State closes in on 70% vaccination goal

June 21 set as target date

By **GARY A. WARNER**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Nearly all COVID-19 restrictions could be lifted in as early as just over two weeks, Gov. Kate Brown said Friday, June 4.

The state, as of Friday, was about 127,000 adults short of the goal of getting at least one shot of vaccine into 70% of eligible residents.

Once the state crosses the threshold, Brown said she would lift masking, business capacity, event size, social distance and other limits that Oregonians have dealt with for more than a year.

"We can fully reopen — we can all look forward to that," she said.

Local health officials would then take over the daily decision-making and operations in counties from the Oregon Health Authority.

Brown said even very large events, such as the Pendleton Round-Up in September, would be good to go once the state hits its target vaccination rate.

Oregon's statewide mark stood at 66.8% on Monday. OHA Director Pat Allen said that if the current pace con-

tinues, the mark would be hit about June 21.

"This is not a slam dunk," Allen said.

Allen said that the June 30 deadline set earlier in the year by the governor was well within reach.

"It will take a lot of work by a lot of people to get it done," Allen said.

Lifting restrictions would include:

- Ending the risk level system for counties of lower, moderate, high and extreme.

- Ending a state requirement for masks and face coverings in almost all settings. Exceptions would be airports, public transit and health care settings that follow federal agency guidelines.

- End requirements for individuals to show vaccination verification in public venues and businesses.

- Allow K-12 students to attend school in-person, full time, five days per week.

K-12 students are being revised to support schools in safely delivering in-person instruction throughout the school day.

Current health and safety standards, including indoor mask requirements, will remain in place in workplaces, schools and child care settings. Colleges and universities can make their

own decisions on protocols after considering guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Brown said the move would not mean the pandemic was over in Oregon. She will re-examine whether or not to lift her emergency order that gave her a wide latitude on public health decisions.

"The pandemic will not be over," Brown said.

To try to increase the vaccination rate toward the goal, many pharmacies will extend hours to reach out to more people who want shots.

"Some people are not vaccine resistant, but vaccine inconvenienced," Allen said.

Brown also reiterated plans to give away \$1 million to a vaccinated Oregonian, along with \$10,000 to a vaccinated person in each of the 36 counties. Scholarships worth \$100,000 are also being offered to lucky vaccinated youth.

Brown and OHA officials said it was time to push past the current levels of inoculation as medical evidence and state statistics show the impact of the virus has separated residents into two groups with very different likely futures.