

Extension granted on COVID relief program

Commissioners hear update during public hearing

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Aside from the raucous gathering outside the Wallowa County Courthouse to protest Gov. Kate Brown's mandate on vaccinations for public employees, the county commissioners had a quiet meeting Wednesday, Sept. 1.

In fact, the regular agenda was largely overshadowed by an also-quiet public hearing immediately after the meeting on the Wallowa County Emergency Small Business Microenterprise Assistance Grant Program. The commissioners heard an update on the program from Lisa Dawson, executive director of the Northeast Oregon Economic Development District, the sole attendee at the hearing.

"The purpose of this hearing is to take public comment and I seem to be the only one who has public comment so I can at least tell you where we're at with it," Dawson said. "The county, last year, received \$150,000 to pass through the Northeast Oregon Economic Development District to make grant awards to businesses that were affected by COVID. ... The other funding that came through, even though it had an application process, was much easier to access. We have only made a few grants through this fund so far and have requested an additional six months to continue to try to find appropriate applicants for the funding."

The commissioners approved the six-month extension.

Help so far

"At this point, the funds have assisted 14 people as funds are either made available to a business owner who qualifies as low to moderate income in their household or whose employees qualify as low to moderate income," Dawson said. "The funds cannot be duplicative of any other fund from any other source that a business may have received."

She said the NEOEDD has had to turn down one business applicant.

"Their losses associated with COVID, looking at year over year revenues, were not greater than the amount of other funding they had received," she said. "Most of the businesses that applied, once we requested additional documentation that's needed to get through the application process just aren't willing to provide that information or they figure they won't qualify at that point."

Dawson said she has plans to continue to help applicants get through the difficult process.

"Going forward, we will have another application

workshop/webinar to see if we can explain the program again and get out there to those people who have not applied for another source that's probably the best match at this point," she said.

Commissioner Todd Nash appeared to understand the difficulty Dawson and applicants face.

"So, in general, who would this fit or is it an act of futility?" he asked.

"At some level, it's an act of futility," Dawson said. "But it would fit, let's say, if there was a retail business that didn't apply for PPP (Paycheck Protection Program) and had a decrease in revenue year over year, and they have put in barriers between their counter and the people who were coming in to them. We could include that cost of the physical barrier that they have put in, plus the decrease in revenue that they had experienced year over year, that would be the kind of business that would fit as long as they also had employees who were making under \$31,000 a year, which is possible for a retail business to be paying wages in that level. Or the business owners themselves are in that income level."

Success so far

She reported limited success.

"So far, we have made grants to two restaurants that qualified based on their employees on their staff and two other entrepreneurs who had increased costs or had to figure out a different way of doing business, a new business model," she said.

Commissioner Susan Roberts also comprehended the difficulty of the application process.

"This was a very difficult one to get through," she said.

Commissioner John Hillock, a business owner himself, has been in touch with other merchants.

"Most of the businesses I talked to didn't see a huge decline" because of the pandemic, he said.

Dawson agreed. "The retail sector has generally done better than usual in the last couple of



Lisa Dawson, executive director of the Northeast Oregon Economic Development District, speaks during a public hearing before the Wallowa County commissioners on receiving government grant money for businesses Wednesday, Sept. 1, 2021. Dawson was the only person who spoke and said most businesses found the application process difficult. Commissioner Susan Roberts listens at left.

"MOST OF THE BUSINESSES I TALKED TO DIDN'T SEE A HUGE DECLINE (BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC)."

— John Hillock, Wallowa County commissioner

years," she said. "I think if there were people from the public here, they would say this is a very difficult program to access ... and a couple would be very happy that they got the funding."

During the commissioners' regular meeting, Paige Sully, county counsel, said the Oregon Legislature recently identified all elected officials as those to be included among those who are required to report abuse of children and vulnerable adults. By law, those officials are now required to undergo the mandatory reporting training on such abuse. The commissioners authorized Sully to set up the training.

Other business

Also Wednesday, the commissioners:

- Instructed Sully to go ahead with plans to purchase the Wishart property adjacent to the fairgrounds.

The instructions included paying \$5,000 to be able to exercise an option to purchase the property and were based on a discussion in executive session.

- Hired Wes Garth as a new deputy with the Wallowa County Sheriff's Office.

- Accepted the resignation of Hailey Collier as a 911 dispatcher.

- Accepted the resignation of Amy Stangel from the Department of Youth Services.

- Approved a step increase in pay for Katy Nesbitt.

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David Mildrexler, PhD
Systems Ecologist, Eastern Oregon Legacy Lands

David Mildrexler focuses on terrestrial systems science, global change biology, large landscape conservation, and the educational programs at Wallowology Natural History Discovery Center. He is a Wilburforce Fellow in Conservation Science and holds a PhD in Forest Ecosystems and Society from Oregon State University.

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