

# Wyden addresses range of topics in Wallowa County town hall

By RONALD BOND  
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Snake River dams, Greater Idaho, internet and suicide solutions were among topics addressed by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden during a Wednesday, April 20, town hall with Wallowa County residents.

The longtime senator was asked what could be done to assist crisis workers in the county who help residents considering suicide given a recent increase in local cases.

"I think we all know that the demand for mental health services is through the stratosphere," he said. "I'm particularly concerned because we have such a shortage of personnel."

Wyden cited bipartisan

mental health legislation that is being worked on, and said telehealth is an area to be focused on.

Wyden said he has spent "a lot of time" thinking about Greater Idaho in response to a question not understanding why residents would want to consider having the state's border moved.

"I'm a United States senator to represent every nook and cranny in our state. I understand why people in rural communities are so frustrated," he said, noting there are rural Oregonians who don't feel heard. "I'm trying to make a cornerstone of my service to our state making sure rural voices are always at the table on my watch."

He was asked to share

where he stood on proposals to remove dams from the Snake River and the sweep-

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— U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden

ing impact such a move would result in.

He said Washington politicians, including Gov. Jay Inslee and Sen. Patty Murray, have been "working to have multiple stakeholders involved in trying to find some common ground ...

for fish, trade, fuel, multiple interests. You have to strike a balance."

lane is) energy storage, which is hugely important. ... It has to be part of your toolbox. We're working with all of them."

He addressed a question about political polarization, noting in his answer an increase in Independents as residents don't want a part in the extremes. He noted those extremes is where some politicians tend to move.

"Right now, all of the incentives in American politics are to stay with your base, which pleases the more extreme (supporters)," he said.

And while it seems bad, Wyden encouraged that it's not the worst it has ever been.

"We've been through

tougher than this," he said. "We'll get through it."

He also addressed — and offered assistance to — residents in areas where a strong internet connection is still lacking.

"If we can thread the needle now, it will be copied in a lot of other places. You're not the only person up there by yourself," he said. "Small rural communities in Oregon and elsewhere need to get connected now."

And he said the Russian invasion of Ukraine is proof that the U.S. needs to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels.

"If there is one lesson we learned from the war in Ukraine," he said, "it is that we cannot get off fossil fuels fast enough."



Wyden

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# VA plan calls for big changes to its Walla Walla medical center

By DAVIS CARBAUGH and JOHN TILLMAN  
EO Media Group

WASHINGTON — Oregon U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden last week said he plans to personally contact the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding recommendations to reduce services at the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla.

The VA in mid-March released a report from the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission to modernize and realign the VA health care system. According to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin, the report is in response to the 2018 MISSION Act, also known as the Veteran Community Care Act.

After site visits, listening sessions and data gathering around the country, the AIR Commission listed among its recommendations that the Walla Walla VA reduce ser-

vices to primary care and mental health, which could result in the facility being reclassified as a community-based outpatient clinic, known better as a CBOC, rather than a full medical center, according to the Walla Walla UB.

At a virtual town hall for Union County residents on Wednesday, April 20, Wyden addressed several concerns related to veteran health care in Eastern Oregon. Key points included slow hiring processes, travel pay, difficulties at call centers across VA clinics and attaining health care services outside of the VA.

Wyden noted he has been hearing often from veterans on similar issues and said he will be reaching out to the VA himself for an explanation and how to address the four major concerns brought up at the meeting and potential changes to the Walla Walla medical center.

"Vets have earned the ben-

efits because of their extraordinary service," Wyden said. "The vets committed their lives to our country and now I'm going to make sure we make our commitment to them really clear."

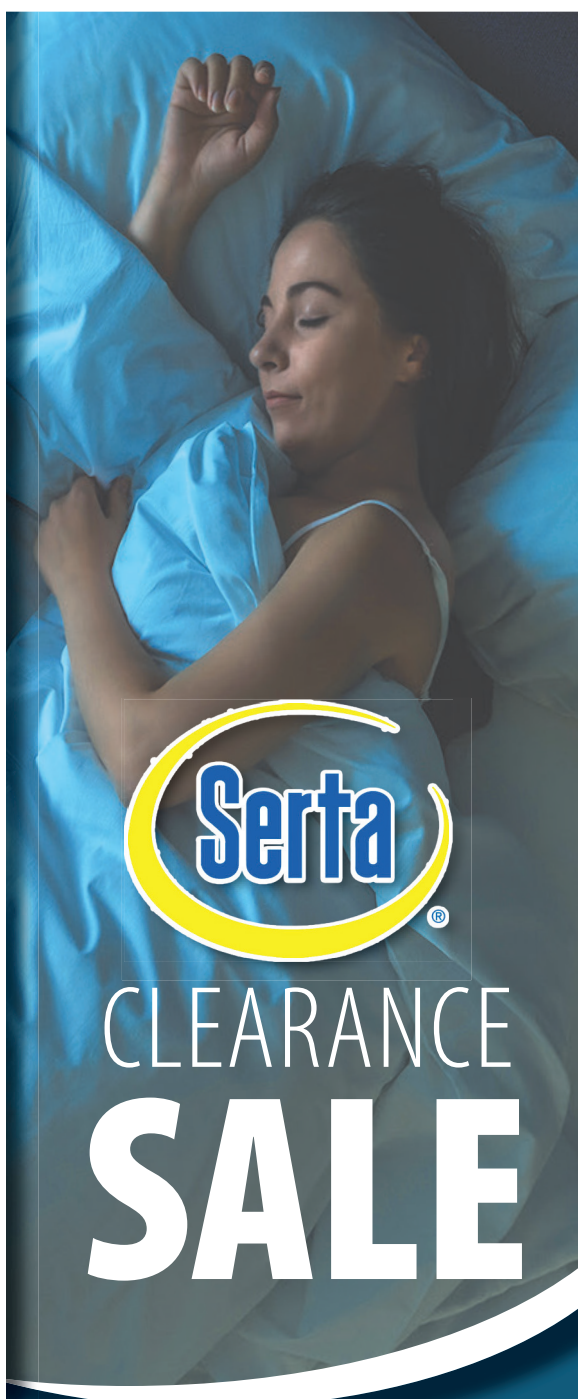
A market analysis showed veteran enrollment in VISN 20, the service region centered by the Walla Walla VA, is predicted to increase modestly and largely outside of Walla Walla. According to the Walla Walla paper, the recommended strategy is to invest in new outpatient facilities and expand services in existing clinics to meet future demand, while "right-sizing" services at the Walla Walla VA, officials said.

The full set of recommendations call for closing a total of 17 VA medical centers nationwide while building 14 new ones and 140 new clinics, according to the Spokane Spokesman-Review, and encourages veterans, especially in rural areas, to seek care from private providers.

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- May 19, 6:00- 7:30 PM**  
Troy School
- June 2, 6:00 - 7:30 PM**  
Cloverleaf Hall in Enterprise
- June 16, 6:00 - 7:30 PM**  
Senior Center in Wallowa
- June 30, 6:00-7:30 PM**  
Joseph Community Center

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