

REPAVING 3.5 MILES OF FREEWAY NEAR MEACHAM

I-84 paving project progresses

By Dick Mason

The (La Grande) Observer

MEACHAM — Road work being conducted on Interstate 84 between Meacham and Spring Creek this summer is a tale of fire and ice.

Oregon Department of Transportation crews and workers contracted by the state agency are laboring under the blazing summer sun while doing paving work designed to make driving in icy winter conditions safer.

They are doing 3 1/2 miles of road restoration on Interstate 84 this summer as part of a \$39 million, two-year, 10-mile project during which ODOT will replace the roadway's surface up to milepost 248 near Kamela, 13 miles northwest of La Grande.

Tom Strandberg, an ODOT spokesperson, said the work is necessary because severe winter weather and heavy use of tire chains have rutted the roadway's asphalt surface.

"This creates hazardous driving conditions when water, snow and ice collect in the ruts, cracks and potholes," he said.

The westbound and eastbound lanes for slow traffic, now made of asphalt, are being rebuilt with concrete and the fast lanes are receiving new asphalt.

Strandberg said concrete, which is longer lasting than asphalt, is the best fit for the slow lanes because they have such heavy truck traffic.

"The slow lanes receive the most punishment," he said.



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer

Employees with Knife River Corp. lay asphalt along a stretch of road between Spring Creek and Meacham on Interstate 84 on Wednesday, July 14, 2021.

Concrete is more expensive than asphalt but the extra cost is worth it, Strandberg said, because it holds up better.

"Asphalt lasts 10 to 15 years but concrete can last at least 35 years," Strandberg said.

The work being done in the I-84 Meacham to Kamela project is having a major impact on traffic because the entire westbound portion is now closed.

While the two westbound lanes are being restored, the two parallel eastbound lanes have traffic traveling in opposite directions.

"It is essentially a two-lane highway," Strandberg said.

Cones have been installed

to divide the two lanes of traffic. The speed limit is being reduced from 70 to 50 mph in the work zone of the project to protect travelers and those working at the site.

The Oregon State Police, working in cooperation with ODOT, have an increased presence at the work zone to discourage people from speeding through it.

The OSP's presence is highest during time periods when many people are working at the site, said OSP Lt. Dan Conner. He said visibly parked police cars, or ones with flashing lights where an officer has pulled someone over, slow motorists passing through the work zone.

ODOT project engineer

Mike Remily said the OSP's help is boosting safety.

"We really appreciate their presence," he said. "They do an awesome job."

Strandberg urges drivers to slow down on this stretch to reduce the likelihood of an accident. He believes more drivers are tempted to exceed the speed limit because they are anxious to get rolling after being homebound for so long during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ODOT spokesperson encourages people who plan to drive west on I-84 to plan ahead so they have plenty of time to reach their destination.

"This will prevent them from becoming frustrated and anxious when driving through the work zone," Strandberg said.

Crews working on the Meacham-Kamela project will be paving the eastbound lanes from Meacham to milepost 241.5. Traffic will be switched to the newly paved westbound lanes, which will then temporarily become a two-lane highway with vehicles traveling in opposite directions.

Remily said having the eastbound and westbound lanes paved at separate times helps crews.

Paving work for the Meacham-Kamela project, which is being funded primarily with federal gas tax money, will continue this year through October and then start again in spring 2022.



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer

Knife River Corp. is restoring 3 1/2 miles of Interstate 84 near Meacham this summer.

Starkey forest closed to camping

LA GRANDE — The Starkey Experimental Forest and Range southwest of La Grande is closed to overnight camping or other overnight uses due to the extreme fire danger, the U.S. Forest Service announced Friday, July 23.

The 25,000-acre forest and range, about 28 miles southwest of La Grande on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, remains open to the public, but under Phase C of public use restrictions.

Those include a ban on

campfires, chain saw use, smoking outside enclosed vehicles and driving motor vehicles off road.

"The extreme fire danger this early in the fire season necessitated our decision to close Starkey to overnight

camping," said Mike Wisdom, research wildlife biologist with the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station. "We will be monitoring fire risk and how best to adapt to the situation going forward."

FIRE HALL

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Councilors considered the proposal during their July 13 meeting. They supported the project but didn't commit any money. City Manager Jonathan Cannon said he was looking into possible options for the money, including COVID-19 federal aid.

County commissioners reviewed the district's proposal during their Wednesday, July 21 meeting, and they approved moving forward with the idea but without any commitment from the county.

The county's attorney will review the terms proposed by the district.

According to the written outline that Rob Gaslin supplied to commissioners on behalf of the district, the primary fire station, on Pocahontas Road between West Campbell Loop and Washington Gulch Road, is on leased property. The lease

ends in five years "and there are significant obstacles to renewing," according to the outline.

District officials recently started searching for a new location, with the expectation that the process would take three to five years, and that building a new fire station would cost about \$2.2 million, according to the outline.

The 23rd Street property, which includes a 7,500-square-foot building constructed in 2008, is an attractive option because it's much less expensive than what the district was expecting to spend for a new fire station.

The outline the district gave to county commissioners includes a listing from Sunfire Real Estate in Baker City putting the price for the property at \$720,000.

"The District is attempting to secure funding for this project through multiple

avenues including grants, gifts, partnerships and debt," according to the outline. "The District is at the early stages of this process, but it is expected that there will be a need to act very quickly to make this happen."

The district is asking property owners within the district for donations to help with a down payment.

The 23rd Street property, which is south of Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative's headquarters, is owned by Springer Development LLC of Walla Walla, Washington, a real estate company. Banner Bank is listed as a member of the corporation, according to the Oregon Secretary of State's Corporation Division.

The district is working with four financing companies, and it estimates it will need to borrow between \$350,000 and \$620,000 to acquire the 23rd Street building.



Medical Springs Rural Fire Protection District/Contributed Photo

The Medical Springs Rural Fire Protection District has received a \$9,400 grant from the Wildhorse Foundation to replaced old tires on three trucks.

Fire district gets grant to replace outdated tires

■ Some fire truck tires are 19 years old

MEDICAL SPRINGS — The Medical Springs Rural Fire Protection District has received a \$9,400 grant from The Wildhorse Foundation to replace old tires on three of the district's trucks.

One of those trucks, a water tender, has 10 large tires, said Judy Whitley of the district, which covers an area around the Baker-Union county border northeast of Baker City.

Tires that will be replaced with the Wildhorse grant range in age from 10 to 19 years, Whitley said — beyond the normal lifespan for tires.

This isn't the first grant the Medical Springs district has received from The Wildhorse Foundation, which is managed by Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in partnership with Wildhorse Resort & Casino near Pendleton.

The district has also used grants from The Wildhorse Foundation to equip a water tender and supply cache trailer, set up a helicopter pad, buy a backup generator, water filtration system, computer and audio-visual equipment for training, Whitley said.

"Their grants have helped us obtain equipment and improve facilities that we otherwise could not afford," Whitley wrote in a press release.

SAFE SLEEP

Continued from Page A1

A big part, she said, is modeling safe sleep practices in the Birth Center.

"That's the big take-away," she said.

This includes using a HALO sleep sack (instead of blankets) and placing the newborn on his or her back.

Upon discharge, every patient goes home with a free sleep sack, which has been funded by the hospital auxiliary and foundation.

"They've been so gracious in supporting the program," Sargent said.

Visitor restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic have affected outreach a bit. For instance,

no one is using the waiting room where there is a display of a portable crib, a doll wearing a sleep sack, and informational materials on safe sleep.

"To have that visual is really important," Sargent said. "With COVID and visitor restrictions, it's come down to the patients and significant others."

Community outreach was also harder over the past year.

"There wasn't Community Night Out or school registration, and we didn't participate in farmers markets," she said.

Even with the challenges of 2020, Sargent estimates that at least 1,500 pamphlets with information about safe sleep practices were distributed in the community.

"To have that visual is really important."

— Sommer Sargent, OB supervisor at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City, talking about the display in the waiting room that shows safe sleeping methods for infants

A community project

The local coalition includes the district attorney's office, Saint Alphonsus, St. Luke's, the Northeast Oregon Compassion Center, Baker County Health Department, the Department of Human Services, and first responders.

The Compassion Center, located at 1250 Hughes Lane, houses the cribs for the Cribs for Kids program. Cribs are purchased with community donations.

Cribs for Kids was founded in 1998 to provide education on safe sleep for infants. According to the organization, about 3,500 babies die in their sleep every year.

These deaths are classified as SUID, or Sudden Unexpected Infant Death. Some are due to SIDS — Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, of which the cause is unknown.

However, the organization reports that many infant deaths are due to suffocation or strangulation in unsafe sleeping environments.

In addition to education, the program provides free cribs for families that might not otherwise have a safe place for their baby to sleep.

For information on supporting the Cribs for Kids program, call the Compassion Center at 541-523-9845.

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