

Budget shortfall forces John Day to close police department

■ Police department will close Oct. 31

By **BENNETT HALL**
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The John Day Police Department will cease to exist by the end of the month — even though the city has yet to work out an agreement with Grant County to provide law enforcement services through the sheriff's office.

The city council voted on Tuesday, Oct. 12, to suspend the department's activities at midnight Oct. 31 in the face of an insurmountable budget shortfall. The vote was unanimous, with Councilor Gregg Haberly absent.

The decision came in the wake of a failed ballot measure this summer that would have raised enough money to fund the department for the next five years. The proposed local option levy actually attracted more yes votes (284) than no votes (169). But the Aug. 17 special election required a double majority for the levy to pass — a majority of votes cast plus a majority of registered voters casting ballots — and a low turnout doomed the measure.

The council referred the measure to the voters after determining that the city did not have enough money to continue funding police services and still balance its budget.

"This is a sad day," City Manager Nick Green told the council at the Oct. 12 meeting. "We fought and fought and fought and we tried and tried and tried, but with the budget the way it is, we just can't sustain operations."

City officials had hoped to keep the department going at least until the end of the year while they pursued a three-year grant from the Department of Homeland Security that would provide partial funding for law en-

forcement services in the city limits. But the grant decision has been delayed, Green said, forcing the city to move up the timetable for halting law enforcement operations even though it's still in the running for the federal funds.

"There's a lot of uncertainty around that," he said. "That's the reason I'm using the term 'suspend' instead of 'dissolve' or 'disband.'"

The department was already down to about half strength, with just two full-time officers and no chief after Chief Mike Durr retired earlier this year.

The department's two remaining full-time employees, Sgt. Scott Moore and Officer Travis Piercy, will transition into new jobs with the Public Works Department.

Moore, who attended the meeting, said he and Piercy had been working long hours to patrol the city but couldn't keep up that pace indefinitely. "It's just reality right now," he said. "With just the two of us, it's just not feasible. It's just not safe."

Several councilors expressed dismay that the city could no longer keep the department running.

Heather Rookstool said she didn't want to suspend the police department but didn't see any alternative. With such a small force, she said, officer safety is compromised.

"I hate this, but with only two (officers), I don't see this as something we can do," she said. "I don't want to be the reason for something bad happening to one of them."

Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley also was in the audience at the meeting. He said suspending the police department now would place a heavy burden on his deputies, who would have to take on added patrol duties.

"I understand the spot you're in, but you're also putting us in a spot because

you're going to put us down four officers as soon as you do this," he told the council. "I look at my people and it's going to saddle them with a nightmare."

Mayor Ron Lundbom said city officials had done everything they could to persuade voters to support the levy and predicted many residents who voted against it or didn't vote at all would be appalled at the sudden reduction of law enforcement services.

"I think they've got no one to blame but themselves," he said.

Councilors Shannon Adair and Paul Smith said the city and county would now have to work together to find a way to provide adequate law enforcement resources for all of Grant County, including John Day.

Green said "conversations are progressing" toward a law enforcement services agreement with the county, but no deal has yet been reached. He said the city had offered to turn over its entire share of property tax revenues, around \$300,000 a year, to the county.

"That's more than enough to cover three of four officers," Green said.

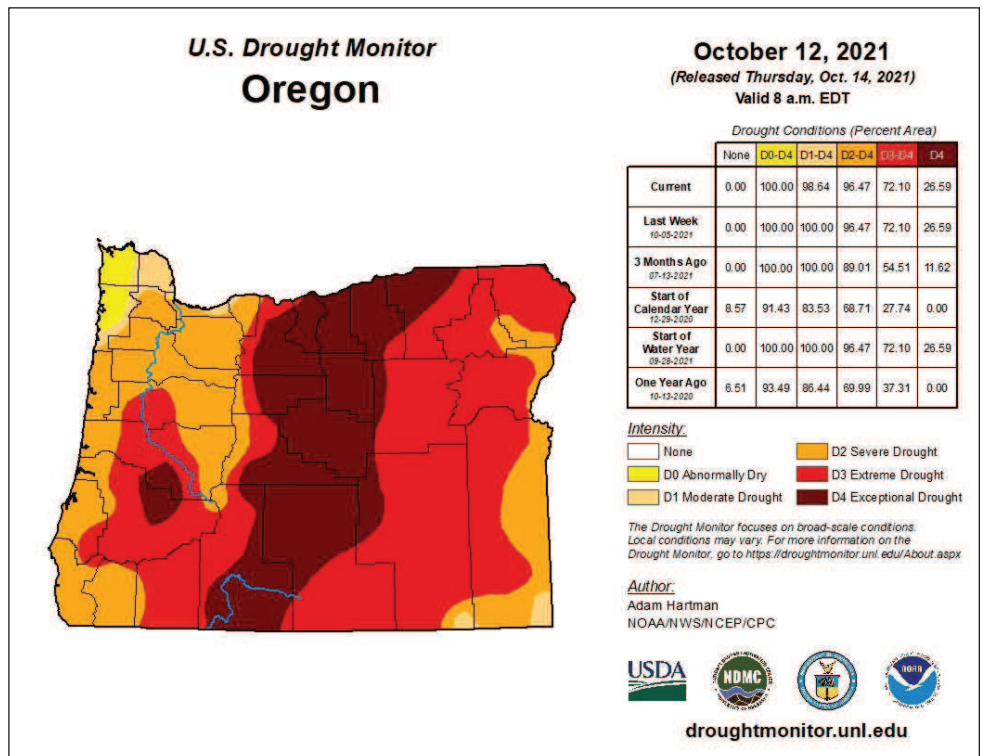
But County Commissioner Sam Palmer, sitting in the audience, responded that the county would have to shoulder other costs besides salary and benefits, such as training, vehicles, firearms and other equipment.

"It's going to cost a lot more than \$300,000 to take it over," he said.

Asked by Lundbom for his solution to the problem, Palmer said the question has given him some sleepless nights.

"As elected officials, we're all going to have to do our best to keep our officers safe and our people safe," he said.

"I agree with Shannon and Paul: We're going to have to work together."



The most recent map from the U.S. Drought Monitor shows most of Baker County in extreme drought, one step below the worst category.

RAIN

Continued from A1

But he said the impending series of potentially damp days should help ease the severity of the drought.

"I'd really like this pattern if I were a rancher or farmer," Breidenbach said. "This is a pretty significant storm coming in."

Mark Ward is a farmer, and he hopes Breidenbach's prediction proves out.

"I hope it comes and keeps coming," said Ward, whose family grows potatoes, peppermint, alfalfa, field corn and other crops in Baker Valley.

If the forecast comes close to or surpasses the one-inch prediction, rainfall at the Baker City Airport would exceed the monthly average — in just five days.

Although Baker City, with an average annual rainfall of about 10 inches at the airport, is much closer to desert than to rainforest most of the time, October is among the more desiccated months.

October's average rainfall of 0.64 of an inch ranks it as the fifth-driest. But two of the drier months — February and August — both average 0.63.

The driest month is July, with an average of 0.51, and the runner-up is September, at 0.57.

Although recent storms have brought much more wind than rain to Baker County, Breidenbach said the situation for the coming days is quite different.

Those storms originated in the North Pacific and had limited moisture, he said.

But the pattern that's predicted to commence today and continue into early next week involves what meteorologists call an "atmospheric river."

Dousing The Drought

Forecast for Baker City:

- Thursday night, Oct. 21 — 20% chance of rain
- Friday, Oct. 22 — 80% chance of rain
- Saturday, Oct. 23 — 70% chance of rain
- Sunday, Oct. 24 — 70% chance of rain
- Monday, Oct. 25 — 70% chance of rain
- Tuesday, Oct. 26 — 50% chance of rain

"I'd really like this pattern if I were a rancher or farmer. This is a pretty significant storm coming in."

— **Jay Breidenbach, National Weather Service**

The river in this case is a plume of moisture high in the atmosphere, Breidenbach said. And this moisture, with a source in the tropical South Pacific, is much more copious than what previous storms could muster.

"This is going to feel like a real rain, I think," Breidenbach said.

Another difference is duration.

The cold fronts that swept through earlier in the month had narrow swathes of limited moisture, with skies rapidly clearing once the front had passed.

But atmospheric rivers tend to persist for days, Breidenbach said.

Although there will be dry stretches during the event, he said the forecast calls for multiple periods of prolonged rainfall.

Most of the moisture, even at higher elevations, should be liquid, as the snow level is forecast to stay above 7,000 feet for much of the period.

But Breidenbach said snow levels should drop below 5,000 feet late in the weekend, and significant amounts of snow could accumulate on the higher peaks of the Elkhorns and Wallawas.

A bountiful snowpack can help replenish drought-depleted reservoirs, but Ward said that although he also hopes for a snowy winter, his more pressing concern is for this fall.

The drought has left the soil so dry, he said, that his family's farming operation has made a major change to its fall schedule.

Normally fall is a time for tilling the remnants of this year's crops into the soil, enriching it with organic matter.

But not in 2021. "It's just too dry," Ward said.

His concern is that by tilling the parched soil now, the top layer would blow away in the gusty wind that has been so persistent.

Ward said he is waiting for rain to moisten the soil before commencing the fall tilling.

He has another, possibly even more critical, reason to pine for a drenched autumn.

Ward said that if the ground in the mountains is still dusty when it freezes and is covered by snow, much of the snow when it melts next spring will soak into the soil rather than flow into streams and reservoirs.

Which means even a deep snowpack, which farmers and ranchers rely on to supply irrigation water, might bring only meager relief to the drought if autumn is as arid as the rest of 2021.

"A good snowpack on top of dust doesn't do us much good," Ward said.

PHARMACY

Continued from A1

Bi-Mart announced in late September that it was selling its pharmacy operations to Walgreens, and closing the pharmacies in most Bi-Mart stores.

Loennig said she and other employees learned about the closures during an emergency meeting a couple hours before Bi-Mart issued a press release.

Although the release didn't list the 10 Bi-Mart stores that will continue to have a pharmacy, operating under the Walgreens name, Loennig said employees were told that the Baker City store wasn't among those.

"It was kind of a shock," Loennig said.

The nearest Bi-Mart that will continue to have a pharmacy is in Weiser, Idaho, she said.

The pharmacy at the Baker City store is slated to close Nov. 9.

Loennig, who said she plans to stay in Baker City and potentially work in one of the other local pharmacies, in the Safeway, Albertsons and Rite Aid stores, said a combination of factors contributed to a financial

challenge for Bi-Mart pharmacies.

Those include rising costs for prescription drugs, limited reimbursements from insurance companies, and Oregon's corporate activity tax which took effect in 2020, she said.

Although Bi-Mart closed its pharmacies at 13 stores in the Portland area in 2019, Loennig said the Baker City pharmacy was "doing OK" recently.

The corporate activity tax, she said, "pushed everything over the edge" for Bi-Mart's pharmacy business. Loennig said the Baker City pharmacy had employed seven people, but two had left recently due to the state's COVID-19 vaccination mandate.

She said Bi-Mart offered all five remaining pharmacy employees jobs elsewhere in the Baker City store.

Loennig urges local residents who have used the Bi-Mart pharmacy to be patient during what she expects will be a "really rough couple of months ahead" as the store's prescriptions are transferred to other pharmacies.

"It will get better," she said.

Bi-Mart's pharmacy has processed about 1,500 pre-

scriptions per week, Loennig said, and distributing those among other local pharmacies will present a temporary challenge.

She said pharmacists at the other Baker City stores are "doing their best."

Loennig said that in addition to working at another local pharmacy, she is interested in potentially teaching classes at Blue Mountain Community College, which she has done in the past.

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