

Merkley sees federal role in solving local issues

BY ERICK PETERSON

East Oregonian

HERMISTION — Sen. Jeff Merkley on Friday, June 17, advocated for using the federal government to find solutions to local problems in the wake of the pandemic.

"It's been a tough two years," he told the crowd after he stepped onstage during the second day of the 2022 Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston.

Sen. Ron Wyden and U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz also participated, but they streamed in via video.

Merkley spoke of the difficulty of the pandemic years, the pains of lockdowns and the struggles of school children who suffered isolation. He also mentioned the recent flooding in Echo, which he was planning to visit later in the day, as well as supply chain problems, inflation and global warming.

Still, he maintained, there were solutions to our problems. Rising gas prices, for example could be addressed by reducing "our addiction to oil." By opening more ports, we can fix supply chain woes. And earmarking government funds for various government projects also can help.

Merkley said we are planning for a



Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley spoke at the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston High School on Friday, June 17, 2022.



Hermiston City Council member Roy Barron shares his thoughts on the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit on Friday, June 17, 2022 and discusses the future of Eastern Oregon.

brighter future.

The Eastern Oregon Women's Coalition organized the event June 16 and 17 in Hermiston. The general session was June 17 at Hermiston High School and open to the public.

Following his speech, Merkley retired to a classroom at the school, where he met with individuals and talked more.

"Economic development is on ev-

erybody's minds, as well as the immediate economic issues of gas prices, food prices and drug prices," he said.

He called it "shocking" that housing and gas prices have risen quickly. Drugs, too, are expensive, he said, which worries people. He said he is fighting in Congress for solutions, including for a windfall profits tax.

"I hope we'll be in a better place in a year," he said.

Merkley also said he was aware of issues in Umatilla and Morrow counties. He said he helped secure a \$500,000 community-initiated project grant for Echo for water infrastructure and was visiting the town to see flooding damage.

"What I'm anticipating is that they're going to need a lot of repair work that will involve the Corps of Engineers," he said. "I'll be looking to their guidance, but if they are seeking to apply, Sen. Wyden and I, and I'm sure Cliff Bentz, will advocate to get

help from the Corps of Engineers and hopefully funding to improve their protection from the next big rain impact."

Merkley also discussed groundwater pollution in Morrow County. "It's a very big deal," he said. "Nitrate pollution has a lot of health implications."

Merkley said he was planning to meet with Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty, who has been getting surveys of wells in his county and has been discovering dangerous levels of nitrates in well water.

Merkley called this a problem that has been known for decades. It is only now, he said, that local officials are taking it seriously.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how I can help them out," he said.

And he left a message for the people of Eastern Oregon.

"Our future depends on our investment in infrastructure and our investment in education," he said. "In the meantime, though, we have a lot of problems from the droughts, from the fires, from the conditions in our forests, and I'm going to be working with local communities on tackling those problems from every direction I can."

Oregon DEQ increases Port of Morrow fine to \$2.1 million

East Oregonian

BOARDMAN — Oregon Department of Environmental Quality has increased the penalty against the Port of Morrow from \$1.3 million to a little more than \$2.1 million.

State environmental regulators levied the initial fines in January, accusing the port of excessively spreading nitrogen-rich wastewater as fertilizer on area farmland for years. DEQ announced in a statement Friday, June 17, the additional \$800,000 is "for additional violations involving over

application of wastewater containing nitrogen to agricultural fields in the Lower Umatilla Basin, an area with longstanding groundwater contamination."

The Port of Morrow has been appealing the \$1.3 million in fines.

"The Port of Morrow recognizes groundwater contamination is a serious problem, and has been for decades," port Executive Director Lisa Mittelsdorf said. "The port believes this is a community problem that will require a community solution. By

the DEQ's own analysis, the port's industrial wastewater reuse program is responsible for less than 5% of the area's nitrates. We will continue to work with DEQ to collaborate on a solution that will address what happens to industrial wastewater during winter months without shutting down the industries generating that wastewater."

According to the statement from DEQ, the Port of Morrow is one of many sources contributing to nitrate contamination in northern Morrow and Umatilla counties — an area

known as the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area.

The primary source of contamination in the area, about 70%, is from fertilizer used on irrigated farmland, according to the management area's action plan. Additional contributors are dairy and cattle farms (about 20%), food processing facilities (about 5%) and residential septic systems and other sources (about 5%).

The Port of Morrow collects wastewater from food processors, storage facilities and data centers in its in-

dustrial park outside Boardman. The port has a DEQ water quality permit that allows it to use the nitrogen-rich wastewater for irrigation on nearby farms, but the permit includes limits on how much nitrogen the port can apply to the farmland and how much nitrate and moisture can be present in soil prior to applications.

The new notice requires the port to "develop and implement an approval plan to achieve compliance with both the nitrogen loading and moisture content limits in the permit."

Firefighters

Continued from Page A1

Prompted by the City Council's March 22 notice, county commissioners released a request for proposals for a new ambulance operator and received two responses from private companies — Metro West Ambulance of Hillsboro, and Victory EMS of Boise.

Commissioners voted unanimously on June 8 to hire Metro West to run ambulances in both the Baker ambulance service area, which includes Baker City and about two-thirds of the rest of the county, as well as the Huntington area.

(The county's other ambulance service areas are in the Richland and Halfway/Oxbow areas.)

Baker City's proposed budget for the fiscal year that starts July 1 cuts staffing in the fire department from 16.25 full-time equivalents to 10.5.

The City Council is scheduled to adopt that budget June 28.

But Johnson said that with three employees recently leaving, along with another firefighter/paramedic slot that has been vacant for several months, it appears the city might achieve the cuts through sheer attrition.

The recent defections have left the fire department unable to respond to multiple simultaneous calls.

The county declared a local emergency on May 24, a week after the Baker City Fire Department notified the county about the staffing shortages.

"When we receive fire call and medical call simultaneously, we will have to triage the calls as they come and determine the greatest threat to life and property," Baker City Fire Chief Sean Lee wrote in an email to the county. "My hope is that this will give you an opportunity to find a provider for the interim that will be able to maintain the existing level of service."

In response, the county contracted with a private company, American Medical Response, to have an ambulance temporarily available for calls in the Baker ambulance service area starting Friday, May 27, the beginning of Memorial Day weekend.

AMR operated an ambulance through June 10. The county paid the company \$3,700 per day.

The county subsequently approved a short-term contract with Metro West, which will also provide one advanced life support ambulance for the Baker and Huntington ambulance service areas prior to the company fully replacing the Baker City Fire Department.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Baker City firefighter/paramedic Casey Johnson, left, president of the local union chapter that represents Baker City firefighters, and Ron Morgan, a district vice president for the Oregon State Firefighters Council, went door to door in Baker City on Tuesday morning, May 3, 2022, to urge residents to oppose a city proposal to end ambulance service Sept. 30, 2022, forcing Baker County to find a different provider.

The county is paying Metro West \$1,000 per day. The contract also states that Metro West will reimburse the county for \$500 for each "paid transport," to a maximum reimbursement of \$7,000 per week.

Metro West is charging \$1,500 for each transport, along with \$21 per mile with a patient on board.

The contract runs through July 31.

City fire department 'playing second fiddle'

Johnson said that although he understands the need for more ambulances given the fire department's shrinking workforce, he points out that this is largely the product of the City Council's decision to concur with Cannon's contentions about the department's financial situation.

He considers it an affront to his and his colleagues' professionalism that the city's contract with Metro West, in common with the contract with AMR, designates the contractor, not the city, as the first call ambulance.

That means the Baker City Fire Department responds with an ambulance only when

the contract ambulance is already on a call.

Johnson said it's frustrating to listen to the emergency radio and hear a contract ambulance handling calls that he and his co-workers are accustomed to responding to.

"We care about our com-

munity," he said. "We're not allowed to do what we're trained to do. We're playing second fiddle. It's painful."

Johnson said he probably would violate the callout protocol if, for instance, he heard an emergency call regarding a person in cardiac arrest.

He said he doubts he could simply sit in the fire station knowing someone's life was threatened.

That protocol, besides the clauses in the county's contracts with its temporary ambulance providers designating them as the first call ambulance, is reiterated in a June 1 memo from Lee, the fire chief.

It reads: "Baker City Fire Departments will not self-dispatch to any emergency call of other emergency agencies. All emergency response agencies have mutual aid request abilities to request Baker City Fire responders."

More resignations coming?

Although the city's budget calls for the fire department to continue to respond to fire calls after the ambulance service ends, Johnson said he's not certain that enough firefighters will stay to meet even the reduced workforce level the city is planning. The city might need to hire replacements for firefighters who leave even though their jobs aren't on the layoff list, he said.

"There are guys whose jobs are safe who are having a long hard look at what they want to do with their lives," Johnson said.

He's one of those guys. "I love this job — it's my identity," he said. "But I've been considering getting out of the

fire service altogether."

Johnson, who has worked for the fire department since December 2017, said the stress has been accumulating since the City Council sent its notice to the county March 22.

He's lost sleep.

Johnson said he would strongly consider taking a job in a larger city with a single-role fire department, where firefighters respond to fires but don't also operate ambulances.

But he said a job in Baker City, once the fire department ends ambulance service, is much less appealing because there are relatively few fires.

Ambulance runs account for about 85% of the department's calls.

Johnson said a 24-hour shift last week was something of a preview of what he might expect once the city's ambulances are parked for good.

He said there wasn't a single ambulance or fire call during the shift. Metro West handled all the requests for an ambulance.

Johnson thinks the city, if it needs to hire firefighters to maintain the workforce budgeted for the coming fiscal year, might find that a tough task. "What firefighter would want to move to a town where this is going on?" he said.

Johnson contends that the city's planned fire department schedule, with two firefighters per shift, is not sufficient, posing a threat to firefighters and to the public.

In particular, he fears that with just two firefighters on duty, they wouldn't be able to enter a burning building unless there are at least two other firefighters available to

serve as a backup.

City officials dispute that.

In the ambulance service information page on the city's website, bakercity.com, the city states that "Our skilled Fire Department staff will still be able to enter a burning building to save lives per OSHA regulations and laws, even with the proposed staff model. The City also has mutual-aid agreements and great partnerships with other departments such as North Powder and Baker Rural Fire Department. They all can assist when we have a larger fire if needed."

Jobs with the new ambulance provider?

As required by state law, Metro West's proposal to the county states that the company "would also offer to hire any fire Paramedics or EMT's that lose employment with Baker City."

The law requires that a new ambulance provider give hiring preference to qualified employees from the previous provider for at least six months after the change.

Johnson calls that clause "laughable" and a "terrible consolation prize."

He said he would never consider working for the company that replaced the fire department as local ambulance provider — although Johnson said he knows a Metro West paramedic who is stationed in Baker City now, saying he is a "super nice guy."

Johnson said that although he can't speak for all fire department employees, "I don't see anybody at our fire department entertaining that idea," meaning taking a job with Metro West.

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