

Morrow County provides water filters to counter nitrates

BY ERICK PETERSON

East Oregonian

BOARDMAN — From her bed, Jane Kurtz of Boardman expressed gratitude for a new filtration system that went into her home.

"I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart," Kurtz said to plumber Tory Uskoski, Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty and Ana Pineyro, the county's communicable disease and emergency preparedness coordinator. "You guys are awesome."

On July 14, Kurtz received the first of 350 systems planned to go out to Morrow County homes to address high nitrate levels, according to Doherty.

"We're going to ease into it," the commissioner said of the installations.

Three would take place on July 14, and Doherty said he expected six installations a day in the following week. He described the process as "taking baby steps," with installers carefully approaching the project and learning potential problems.

Addressing the nitrate problem

Morrow County commissioners declared a local state of emergency on June 9, following the discovery of well water that contained unsafe nitrate levels. Since then, further testing found other home's drinking water unsafe, with nitrate levels above 10 parts per million.

This applies only to some well water. The city of Boardman has verified its water is safe to drink. There are private well owners who have tested their drinking water and found it to be safe, too.

Concern remains, though, for people whose well water is rich in nitrates. Many have taken advantage of clean water that has been made available to them at sites, including Sam Boardman Elementary in Boardman. They also have sought free testing, available at Boardman Foods in Boardman, among other locations.

Installing the first filters

Tory Uskoski, Blue Mountain Plumbing plumber, and Travis Gaines, assistant, installed the first of the filters. They said the devices are reverse osmosis systems with 2.5-gallon storage tanks.

Uskoski said this particular installation was simple and they are within the ability of DIY-inclined homeowners. However, this is not



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Jane Kurtz of Boardman and Ana Pineyro, Morrow County communicable disease and emergency preparedness coordinator, discuss Kurtz's water issues July 14, 2022.

the case for every situation, he said.

"Everyone is a little different," he said.

Installation could become complicated at some homes. And some people, he added, might lack the ability or knowledge to perform any installation at all.

He said the filtration systems will need maintenance, including a change of filters between one and three years, depending on the level of nitrates in filtered water.

According to Doherty, this first installation was necessary, though many other homes might be in even greater need.

"Sad to say, this one was one of the low ones, at 28 (parts per million)," he said of Kurtz's home.

He added different agencies have varying levels of acceptability. Some groups, he said, take issue with water that has nitrate levels over 5 ppm. Water processed through the new filtration units has a negligible nitrate level in most cases.

"If you get some of those extremes that we're



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Tory Uskoski, Blue Mountain Plumbing plumber, adjusts a newly installed filter July 14, 2022, in a Boardman home.

getting, like a 68 or 70, the filters do a great job, but the higher you get, the harder it is to pull down," he said.

He added the systems still can reduce nitrates to drinkable levels, but filters require more frequent changing — maybe once every three months, rather than every year or more.

Doherty said these filters in the future may be adjusted so they can protect from arsenic, lead and coliform bacteria. For now, however, such work is outside the county's scope.

"That's outside of our emergency, which is a nitrate emergency," he said. "In the short term, we just want to get something that will pull these nitrates out."

He added it is a "great idea" for homeowners to test their wells for other contaminants.

Nitrate problems started years before Kurtz said she had mostly avoided drinking her well water, as she preferred the taste of bottled water and flavored drinks. That said, she has consumed a fair amount of well water; Kurtz cooked with it, used it for making coffee and even swallowed it in her shower.

"It looked like water," she said, for decades she believed she was not in danger.

It didn't look as though it was unsafe to drink, she said, as it was clear. Kurtz said that she felt especially protected by heating it, but she now knows that boiling the water doesn't remove nitrates.

In 1978, according to Kurtz, she moved into her home. At the time, she tested the water. She said she was told that she would be fine drink-

ing the water if she used a water softener. Kurtz added that only recently she learned that a water softener alone would not make her water safe.

She said she doesn't blame contaminated water for all of her health woes, though it may have contributed to some of her problems.

Nitrate consumption has been linked to ill health in people with low immunity, including children, pregnant women and individuals who are already sick.

Pineyro showed up at her home one day, going door to door recently, and asked to test the water. Kurtz welcomed her to do that.

Kurtz said she doesn't blame any person or industry for actions they may have taken to put nitrates in her water. Many of the responsible people, she said, are long gone, and were acting with the best knowledge they had at the time.

Standing at Kurtz's bedside, Doherty said he agreed with her assessment. He added that companies doing business in the area now are operating with better practices, and they, too, are concerned.

"Twenty-five or 30 years ago, when this desert was blossoming, folks just went out every year and put on 200 or 300 pounds of nitrogen. It's just what they did. Now, they've got precision measuring and dispensing of fertilizers," he said.

Doherty said he favors action that keeps businesses open, while also improving their techniques.

Another Boardman homeowner, Gary Klinger, said he received a water filtration unit, too. He said county officials tested his water and found his nitrate level to be around 5 ppm.

For years, he said, he has used the water for cooking and drinking, but he "didn't think anything about it."

After hearing about local concerns about nitrates he investigated. According to Klinger, though some agencies would consider his water drinkable, he would rather be safe than sorry, which is why he asked for the filtration system, which was provided free of charge.

His complaint, he said, is that the filter is only for his kitchen. He would prefer a system that would remove nitrates from all his water, regardless of where he received it.

"I should be able to drink from my hose and not have to worry about it," he said. "I'm grateful for what I have. Don't get me wrong. I'd just like it to be a little different."

Students

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The contingent includes six girls and three boys, he said.

Seven female students will be living in one of the homes the school district bought earlier this year to house OIS students.

Five male students will live in the other house, McDowell said.

The remaining students will live with individual host families.

The district is still looking for host families for three girls and one boy from the Isle of Jersey during their one-month visit, McDowell said.

International School history

The Baker School District started the OIS program about four years ago, but the pandemic interrupted progress.

The district also had to wait for approval of its application for a student visa program under which Oregon will pay the district the standard per-student rate for each visiting student.

That revenue is part of the

district's projects that the OIS will bring in more in revenue for the district than it will spend. A financial projection that the school board reviewed this spring estimated a surplus of \$28,000 from the first year, with surpluses rising to \$134,000 the second year and to \$248,000 the third year.

Those projections include the district's payments on the two homes the district bought, one for \$295,000 and one for \$490,000. The district estimates it will spend about \$85,000 more for renovations of the two homes.

In addition to bringing international students to Baker City, a goal of the OIS is to make it easier for local students to study abroad.

"We just need to build those pathways for those opportunities and that's what we're doing right now," Witty said. "The next three months will be building more of those."

Among the countries that local officials have had discussions with are Germany, Ecua-

dor, Wales and Japan.

"The benefit of what we're doing now is using that momentum and, let's be honest, any revenue that comes in above the tuition that we invest back into this program is really dedicated then in sending our kids abroad and all of these unique opportunities," said Thomas Joseph, OIS principal and instructor and its only full-time employee.

Joseph said he is looking at potential exchange agreements with schools in Ecuador.

"It's a phenomenal fit. Most schools are in the capital of Ecuador and both schools want to take students from the United States," he said.

Joseph said he has wanted to engage South America, and one of his visions is to bring students together in a college-level course, writing 121, to discuss world issues in a research-based course.

He said issues such as agriculture are of common interest in Eastern Oregon, South America and Mexico.

Workers

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To support their efforts, investors and local government entities are addressing some of the factors which limit the local pool of prospective employees. In Baker County, Tweit's primary focus in economic development has shifted from attracting industries to attracting workers and keeping the ones who are here. Some of those strategies involve addressing needs for housing, child care, and training.

Workers need places to live

In Baker County, housing construction hasn't keep pace with the growing demand. And that was true even before the pandemic. Local employers, such as school districts, the hospital and manufacturers report that many workers have passed up jobs here because they were unable to find adequate housing.

Population growth accounts for part of that shortage, as Baker City's official population surpassed the 10,000 mark for the first time, according to the 2020 Census.

In addition, the emergence of the short-term rentals, such as bed-and-breakfasts and vacation rentals, has reduced the pool of potential homes even further.

Tweit places the number of short-term rentals at about 85 in Baker County. That represents a significant reduction in potential homes for local residents.

Long-term rental options, which have long been in short supply, have diminished even

further due to higher profits in the short-term market.

In addition, landlords have been frustrated by renters who damage property or don't pay rent. This concern has been increased by legal protections for renters and other regulations, especially during the pandemic. Those who can find a house to rent also find high prices, often putting the option out of reach.

To address the housing need, several building and renovating projects are in the works in Baker City.

Veterans Village, near the Leo Adler Parkway on H Street, broke ground this summer and is scheduled for completion in 2023. The project is intended to provide affordable homes for veterans.

While being developed primarily by private investors, it also involves the Northeast Oregon Housing Authority

and other government and nonprofit entities.

Several private home projects are in various stages of development around Baker City. These include a development between Birch Street and the freeway, another on Baker Street across from Sam-O Swim Center, and one in South Baker near Colorado Street.

In addition, Tweit said residential units are being developed in the former Antlers Hotel building and the building behind it.

While Tweit sees promise in these ventures, he emphasizes that the housing scarcity will not be solved quickly. With an estimated nine-month construction time for a single house, it will take some time before the demand is significantly reduced. Other factors such as inflation and rising interest rates will also impact the housing market.

"Just bring kids together around targeted issues that affect us regionally and just have kids meet kids, the entrepreneurial aspects of that probably speak for themselves. This is exciting," Joseph said.

Witty said they OIS staff have had conversations with officials from a high school in Japan. He said an agreement with that school would be a boon for the program.

"We're stoked about having that potential because in Or-

egon, that is tied to the third language taught in Oregon, especially around the Portland Metro suburbs," Witty said.

He noted that the OIS will be working with students across the state, not only in the Baker School District.

Concern about potential cost

Some residents expressed concerns this spring about the cost of the OIS program when the school board voted to buy the two homes.

During an April meeting, Heather Dallstream, who is the parent of a student in the district, urged the board to reject a proposal to buy the second home.

Dallstream said that although she sees potential value to the OIS, she objects to spending money from the district budget on something that she believes will benefit comparatively few students compared with other possible uses of the dollars.

Cass Robertson Vanderwiele

September 2, 1946 - July 11, 2022

Cass Robertson Vanderwiele, 75, was born on September 2nd, 1946. He left this earth, after a long battle with cancer, on July 11th, 2022.

Cass always loved to play in the dirt, which made a lot of sense because his parents, Julius and Marie Vanderwiele, were the children of early excavating people here in Baker County.

He went first to Catholic school and then to Baker High. During those school years, he worked in his grandparents' gravel pits near what is now the Sunridge Motel. He would shuttle trucks to job sites when he wasn't in the pit. This may not have been strictly legal, but things were done a little differently back then, right?

After graduating high school, Cass went to Eastern Oregon College. He then moved to Pendleton and attended Blue Mountain Community College. There he met Patience Jane Miller, the love of his life. After a brief three-month courtship, on September 9th, 1967, they were married.

They lived, briefly, in La Grande, then moved back to Baker, where they had their first son, Cass Christopher (Casey) Vanderwiele.

Over the years, Cass worked at many different places. Among those were: the City of Baker, Sackos Excavating, and Babbler Brothers (Baker Redi-Mix.) For a short time, he owned Cass Vanderwiele Excavating.

His son, Corey Michael Vanderwiele, was born on January 10th, 1978. Then in 1980, he went to work for a long-time friend, Howard Logsdon, building forest roads.

The family moved into his parents' home in 1984, after both his father and mother passed away.

After Casey graduated in 1988, Corey asked why Cass was always gone during the week. Subsequently, in May of 1989, he started Triple C Redi-Mix, as a family business. Cass absolutely loved working with his wife, sons, and daughter-in-law, Tara. In September of 2021, the business name changed to Triple C Redi-Mix, dba Sand & Gravel.

He greatly enjoyed interacting with people in the community and on projects of all sizes. During his many years at Triple C, he loved nothing more than being in the pit, on a Cat dozer, or on an excavator.

Though he worked hard for his family, he always made time for various boards throughout Baker County. He held the office of president for both OCAPA and ICAPA. He shared the advice and knowledge he'd gained over many years of earth moving and shaping. Throughout his lifetime, he was the recipient of many awards, the highlight of which was the Rocky Award through OCAPA.

Cass was preceded in death by his mother, father, many family members, and several recent career-long friends. To carry out his legacy, he leaves his wife, two sons, a daughter-in-law; his two beloved granddaughters, Dawson and Campbell, and his grandson by employment, Jordan Morrison.

There will be a Celebration of Life/Anniversary Celebration for Cass, on September 10, 2022, from 4:00 PM-6:00 PM at the Thomas Angus Party Barn, 42734 Old Trail Road, Baker City, OR 97814. Friends and loved ones are welcome to stop by at your convenience between those times. It will be a time to visit with Cass's family and offer them love, support, and condolences.

Memorial contributions can be directed to: Colton Accounting, on Church Street, in Baker.

Cass loved making sure the children of Baker who were in need had a great Christmas. A foundation will be created to honor his wishes in his name.

The family would like to thank everyone who has reached out with condolences, and heartfelt words of endearment, for Cass. We have been overwhelmed by your kindness, which truly is a testament to his character and what he meant to this little Eastern Oregon town.

To leave an online condolence for the family of Cass, please visit: www.grayswestco.com.