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Hospital posts \$1.4 million loss

Blue Mountain officials look to cut reliance on costly contract labor

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The Blue Mountain Hospital District ended the fiscal year with a \$1.4 million operating loss, but hospital officials say they have a plan to get out of the red, in part by reducing their reliance on expensive contract labor.

The district's chief financial officer initially anticipated a loss of only \$200,000 for the year, but that estimated increased substantially after correcting how he had earmarked a Medicare reimbursement worth more than half a million dollars.

Eric Price, the district's CFO, said the \$665,000 Medicare reimbursement was recognized as revenue rather than an expense reduction, as it should have been.

Price told the Eagle in a June 23 interview that the district was initially trending at a \$200,000 deficit heading into the end of the fiscal year on June 30. He said the main driver draining the district's budget was labor costs for scarce clinical contract workers, such as nurses, doctors and surgeons, to ensure ongoing patient care during the height of the delta and omicron COVID-19 surges that strained the hospital to its limits.

Ultimately, Price said, the hospital exceeded its annual labor budget by \$4 million. As of June 30, he said, the hospital district had 25 clinical contract workers, including one surgeon.

However, he added, the hospital is already beginning to reduce its contract labor force. In the next few weeks, he said, the hospital anticipates bringing on three to five new local certified nursing assistants. Unlike their out-of-town counterparts, the new CNAs will not command the premium wages of traveling clinical workers.

Nonetheless, according to the hospital district's most recent financial report, labor trended at more than 40% over the hospital's June budgeted amount, with contracted clinical labor surging at more than \$640,000 for the month. In addition, all other operating costs were over budget through the end of June by upwards of \$80,000.

Price attributed soaring supply costs to the high inflation seen across all sectors of the economy. He said freight and fuel costs have impacted the hospital as well.

Putting the hospital's budget woes into context

The hospital district's financial woes are

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DECLARING WAR ON A WEED



Clayton Franke/Baker City Herald

Jeffrey Pettingill sprays a cluster of hoary alyssum near a county road west of Haines. So far, the noxious invader is limited to Baker, Wallowa and Deschutes counties.



Clayton Franke/Baker City Herald

Hoary alyssum (*Berteroa incana*) is a noxious weed that invades pastures, fields and rangelands. The weed can make horses sick and reduce profitability of hay crops.

BY CLAYTON FRANKE
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Jeffrey Pettingill is fortunate that the rural roads west of Haines don't harbor much traffic. His eyes wander often.

He's searching for signs of an enemy. An enemy that, when faced in a one-on-one battle with Pettingill's burly 6-foot-2 frame, doesn't stand much of a chance. He can win by simply gripping the base of its green-gray stem, pulling and exposing its annual root, which is only a few inches long.

But Pettingill is outnumbered — this battle will require a more strategic approach.

Chemical warfare, perhaps. Pettingill, Baker County's weed control supervisor, is facing Baker County's newest noxious weed, hoary alyssum, which he hopes to control before it poses a greater threat to livestock, crop production, and native plants.

The first step for Pettingill is identifying where exactly the hoary alyssum — which travels mostly by hitching rides on equipment and the hooves of livestock — has spread.

That's what he set out to do on Tuesday, July 26, when he traveled to a property in the foothills of the Elkhorns to see how much of the plant was there.

When Pettingill first saw the weed in the pastures near North Rock Creek Road west of Haines in the summer of 2020, he wasn't certain he was dealing with hoary alyssum. Its spindly stem and small white flower can be tough to pick out — even with Pettingill's trained gaze — from



Clayton Franke/Baker City Herald

Baker County weed control supervisor Jeffrey Pettingill mixes his herbicide, Telar, with water and professional-grade ammonium. The added chemicals help the herbicide spread out and stick to the weeds.

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Parks & Rec, John Day City Council plan joint meeting to discuss putting pool bond on ballot

By JUSTIN DAVIS
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The pool is back in play.

At a meeting on Thursday, July 28, the John Day/Canyon City Parks and Recreation District board voted to hold a joint meeting with the John

Day City Council this month with the aim of putting the pool bond back on the ballot in November.

During the May 17 primary election, the \$4 million bond measure failed after ending in a tie. Since then, however, a local political action committee has been pushing to put the initiative back on the ballot after what it calls the inconclusive result in May.

Architects and members of the political action committee

known as Yes to JDCC Swim Center made presentations to the board during the July 28 meeting. The architects went over proposed designs for a new pool, and the PAC members outlined why they think the November general election is a good time to put the pool back on the ballot.

"This was actually our second presentation to the JDCC Parks and Rec board of directors," noted Ashley Armichardy of Yes to JDCC Swim

Center. "We've been working on this for a month now, and we're excited to see it moving forward."

Fellow PAC member Jesse Schaefer said the group is sure the support is there for the measure to pass, which is why the PAC is working to get the bond back on the ballot this November.

"We don't know what the vote is going to be, but the reason we're asking Parks to put it on the ballot is that we think

there is enough support to pass this time," she said. "In May it was a literal tie, 802-802. We know of people who thought that the choice was between redoing Gleason Pool or building a new pool, so we think now that it's clear that the choice is 'new pool or no pool' that there will be a majority to pass the bond."

The 64-year-old Gleason Pool, which had been closed for two years, was demolished in May. The pool site, as

well as the neighboring Gleason Park, has been sold to the state for an expansion of the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site.

Armichardy said she thinks the general election in November will result in a higher turnout than in May and that the PAC hopes to see a definitive "yes" or "no" result instead of a tie. Both Armichardy and Schaefer stressed that most

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Beech Creek Fire closes Highway 395

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

MT. VERNON — Fire crews with the Oregon Department of Forestry, the Malheur National Forest and Grayback Forestry battled a 200-acre blaze that broke out around 1:30 p.m. Monday, Aug. 1, and burned on both sides of Highway 395 North near milepost 106B.

The fire was zero percent contained as of noon on Tuesday, according to Malheur National Forest officials.

Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley said Tuesday, Aug. 2, that air and ground crews, along with local landowners, teamed up to limit the spread of the



Contributed Photo

A heavy-duty air tanker drops fire retardant on the Beech Creek Fire west of Magone Lake on Monday, Aug. 1, 2022.

fast-moving blaze that knocked out a power line to Long Creek and forced the evacuation of two homes.

Because of the hard work of the locals and firefighters, McKinley said, those

who were evacuated did not lose their homes. McKinley said there had no new spread of the fire overnight, with some "decent rain" that worked in firefighters' favor.

The sheriff said Oregon Trail Electric Co-op was working to restore power to the area.

Highway 395 between Long Creek and Mt. Vernon remained closed as of Tuesday.

Grant County Emergency Manager Eric Bush said private property owners in the area were contacted on Monday and were offered assistance for livestock and property protection.

Malheur National Forest deputy fire

staff supervisor Eric Miller said the blaze was initially assigned two 20-person crews with six engines, one single-engine air tanker, plus two additional heavy air tankers and a helitack crew. In addition, Miller said the Forest Service ordered other crews and resources and expected to have them in place Monday evening or Tuesday morning.

Miller said people should stay away from the Beech Creek area west of Magone Lake, where the fire was burning, although the lake itself was still open and could be reached by other routes.

There's a lot of other roads through the forest, Miller said, "so they should just avoid the area."

