

HEPPNER

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ATV plans meet with opposition

A proposed ATV (all terrain vehicle) trail system to be built on county roads in the Anson Wright Park area, met with loud opposition at a public hearing last Thursday night in Heppner.

A group of land owners in the vicinity of the project said they don't want the county to develop trails for use by the public, saying it would bring increased trouble on their property.

The trails, which would be on county owned roads, would bring people, which would bring in problems, they said. The landowners cited increased liability, increased chance of fire, and more trespassing as some of the problems the project would generate.

County officials said the problems could be managed, and that the trail project would bring much needed economic benefit to south Morrow County.

The trail system would cost \$1.2 million to construct and the money would come from a state grant. The money has already been approved, and would include improvements to Anson Wright Park, trail developments (including new cattle guards), signs and road improvements as well as money for weed control and added law enforcement.

Landowners, however, were not convinced, citing possible lawsuits from ATV riders getting off the county owned trails onto private land and hurting themselves, and the possibility of more fires being started and increased trespassing from riders who strayed from the designated trails. The discussion of these issues at times became heated.

"I'm not sure this is what I need," said landowner Bob Mahoney of HM Ranch. "How is this going to help my ranch. I'm not convinced we need this right now."

Rancher Ned Clark who also has property in the area said he was worried about lawsuits from riders, and cited a recent case where ATV riders injured themselves on private property and won a judgment against the landowner's insurance company.

"These are county public roads and if ATVs want to travel these roads land owners can't say no," said Dean Wright. "But I'm concerned about trespassing, fire liability and weed control."

Concerns were also raised about the county's ability to pay for upkeep of the system in the future. Even though there is a grant to build the system would the county be "stuck" paying expenses such as increase law enforcement in the years to come.

County Public Works Director Burke O'Brien said there would be on going money available from the state to pay for upkeep and operating expenses.

Terry Eccles of the Oregon State Parks was also on hand, and said funds to construct and maintain the trail system would come from gas taxes and ATV license fees.

"If we develop a facility we maintain it," he said. "We do law enforcement and medical help. We do education."

On the question of public abuse of the trails and private lands, O'Brien said there would be more control over the ATV riders after the project than there is now, and that a better group of people could be attracted. "We expect families and people who care about the trails would come into the area," he said.

Several land owners thought any ATV trails should be on public lands. "We need to try and get them to public lands," said Joel Peterson. Brian Thompson agreed. Jerry McElligott said the county should go even further and close the roads in the area. "I prefer they close the roads. There is no reason for people to be in there except for private property access. There is just no reason for people to be in there."

On the economic impact of increased ATV riders coming into the south county area, Heppner City Administrator Jerry Breazeale testified that the town needs some help. "South Morrow County is in severe economic distress," he said. "The hospital needs help, stores need shoppers, I hope you would consider the economic impact this would have. This could be positive for the community," he said.

It was estimated that about 70 to 75 riders would use the trails on weekends, and 20 on week days.

Commissioner Dan Brosan also pointed out the economic benefit, saying that any dollars spent in

the community would circulate through and benefit the entire area. "We need to keep businesses on main street and kids in the schools," he said.

County Judge Terry Tallman said he thought the project would be good economically for south county. "This is a good viable opportunity to the people of Morrow County," he said. "This is a chance for people to come and spend money. A chance for some brand new money in Morrow County."

About 90 people attended the public meeting Thursday, and when an impromptu vote was taken the majority of those present raised their hands in opposition to the project.

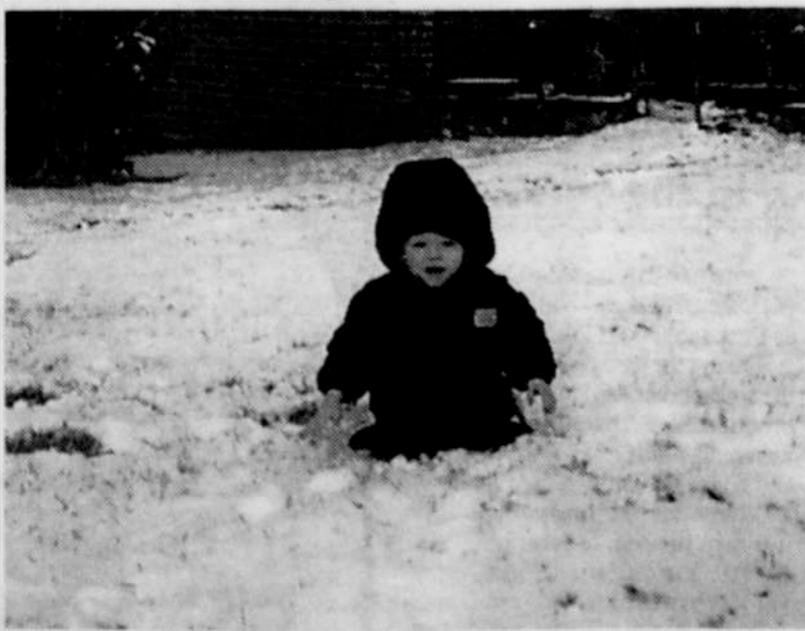
Tuesday O'Brien, who has been spearheading the project, gave a presentation to the Heppner Chamber of Commerce and said that despite the show of opposition he felt that the project was not dead. "We have not given up on it," he said. He did say he was rethinking the entire project to address some of the concerns of the land owners. "We're not abandoning it," he said. "We are rethinking our options. We are going to make adjustments. We are going to work at this hard, and we are going to make this thing work," he said.

"We saw the meeting as positive," said Tallman. "We are going to ask landowners what it will take to get people on board. We are talking to people."

"We will have a scenario after the first of the year," said O'Brien. "We are going to make something happen collectively. The biggest piece of the puzzle is putting something together that everyone can live with," he said.

News Deadline
5p.m. Monday

Snow day!



Micha, two, enjoys the first real snowfall of the season Monday at the home of Doug and Georgia Rathbun of Heppner.

School board OKs HES plan, superintendent severance package

The Heppner-Lexington Advisory Committee brought out the big guns Monday night at the Morrow County School Board meeting and convinced the board to go along with their recommendations for the proposed bond construction at Heppner Elementary School.

The committee, headed by Chairman Mark Rietmann, Heppner, appeared en masse and were vocal in support of their recommendation against closing Stansbury Street, which runs in front of the elementary school, against the recommendation of the school district's management team and several members of the audience.

The management team, which is comprised of administrators-Superintendent Bruce Anderson and school principals-maintained that rerouting the street would be safer for students and would unite the elementary school campus.

The advisory committee countered that rerouting the street would only move the student safety issue to an area which would not be overseen by staff and would cost considerably more than the \$125,000 budgeted for the street. They also voiced concern about the safety of an eight-percent grade which would most likely be required in order to intersect the new street with Court Street/Highway 74 if the street were rerouted between the current junior high and gym buildings.

The board expressed concern about student safety and the district's liability in the event of an accident in front of the school, but agreed to go along with the advisory committee's recommendation after they learned that the committee recommended mechanical barriers for street closure during the school day and other safety improvements.

The plan is dependent upon approval by the Heppner City Planning Commission and the Heppner City Council.

MCSO Board Chair Julie Weikel, Boardman, said that if Heppner City officials do not approve closing the street by mechanical means during school hours, the issue will end up back in the board members' laps. In that event, the board's recommendation would most likely be to choose the alternative plan, which would involve closing Stansbury Street and relocating the street between the old junior high building and the old gym. This plan would also require approval by the city planning commission and the city council and ultimately approval from the Oregon Department of Transportation.

The board approved a plan for the new Ione Elementary School, but deferred a decision about remodeling the Ione High School until specifics about room configuration can be agreed upon. Anderson told the board that because of flood plain issues, the new school must be built over five feet off the ground.

The board also approved plans for the new elementary schools at Irrigon and Boardman. Anderson told the board that the Irrigon Irrigation district owned a piece of property adjacent to Columbia Middle School which the board hopes to acquire for construction. He said that access to the Irrigon construction site will be via Division Street, rather than First Street, which will eliminate the need for the district to pay for expensive road improvements.

The board approved the Boardman plan with the recommendation that the Boardman day care/Head Start building be moved. The Head

Start building is located between Sam Boardman Elementary and the proposed elementary building in the middle of the proposed construction site. Anderson said that the district owns some property which the day care/Head Start board may be willing to trade.

In other business, the board, going against the sentiment of a very vocal Heppner-Lexington audience, agreed to pay Anderson a severance package upon his retirement June 30.

Board member John Renfro, Lexington, said that he had been kept in the dark about the package until the last board meeting when the subject was on the agenda. "This is the first I've seen of it," said Renfro, who was the sole board member in opposition of the severance package. He said, however, that he understood if the board had earlier made an commitment to the package.

Board member John Rietmann said that the issue had not been discussed publicly because it was in the negotiation process. Rietmann and Weikel were the two board members of the negotiating team; the district was also represented by its attorney John Witty and Anderson was represented by his attorney.

Weikel said that when Anderson offered to retire if he was allowed to become eligible for PERS benefits during an executive session held last summer, the board believed it provided a way out. She said it seemed to be the best solution to a difficult situation because Anderson's stint as superintendent had been surrounded by controversy and contention.

Members of the audience and former board member Barney Lindsay, who was removed from the board immediately prior to the board's executive session concerning Anderson's retirement, accused the board of acting on the retirement package in executive session. By law, all decisions by public boards must be made in open session. Lindsay also said that Anderson had told him he did not want him at that particular executive session. Other members of the board told the Gazette-Times, however, that Lindsay was invited to participate in that executive session, despite his removal from the board, but left the meeting on his own accord. Renfro, who had not yet taken office as a board member was not permitted into the executive session. Former board member Keith Lewis, whose position was also vacated by the board because of a residency issue, also did not attend that executive session because of health issues. Lindsay and Lewis had earlier accused the board of holding illegal meetings.

In approving Anderson's severance package, the board agreed to the following:

"1. Mr. Anderson will retire and cease employment with the district as of June 30, 2002.

"2. The Board will pay Mr. Anderson an amount equal to five weeks of salary.

"3. The Board will pay Mr. Anderson for accrued but unused vacation as of June 30, 2002, and will pay health insurance package premiums for coverage through September 2002.

"4. The Board will pay PERS (public employee retirement) contributions on the amounts in #2 and #3 above."

Anderson told the Gazette that the severance package amounts to around \$8,500 in salary for a total of \$11,000 to \$12,000 with

additional benefits such as insurance and PERS.

Rhonda Lorenz, deputy clerk for the district, told the board that this district is required to pay insurance for a month beyond employment. She told the Gazette later that the employer, in this case the district, must pay 12.73 percent of the PERS contribution and, in the case of MCSO administrators, the district also pays an additional six percent to PERS. Lorenz said that MCSO administrators opted to have the district pay the six percent to PERS, while the teachers chose to pay the six percent contribution to PERS themselves, opting instead for a pay raise. Lorenz said that Anderson's salary was \$88,397.

Members of the audience disagreed with the board's position, saying that there was no reason to pay Anderson additional monies because his contract expired on June 30 anyway and added that teachers do not get a severance package when they resign or retire. They also voiced concern that the amount of the severance agreement, which was not specified by the board at the meeting, would take monies away from teachers and programs, especially at a time when state funding cuts are looming before an already "bare bones" budget.

Dwayne Carroll, a former board member present at time of the executive session in question, said that Anderson's retirement should have been discussed in January of last year and implied that the severance agreement may be a less costly option.

The board also heard an objection from Heppner-Lexington Advisory Committee member Marcia Kemp and Renfro concerning representation of the Lexington community on the superintendent screening committee. They stated that they felt the Lexington community should have representation on the committee. The board said that the Lexington community is represented by the Heppner-Lexington Advisory Committee and the Ione-Lexington Advisory Committee. Kemp had submitted her name to the board for selection to the screening committee.

Kemp and others also took exception to the district office highlighting names of people recommended by area chambers of commerce for selection to the screening committee. The list of submitted names was included in the board's meeting packet. All highlighted recommendations were accepted by the board. George Koffler was selected from the Heppner community. Loyal Burns from the Ione community, Barbara Huwe from the Irrigon community and Mike Dipo from the Boardman community.

Other screening committee members include:

classified personnel-Martha Munkers, Lexington, and Sharon Samples; licensed personnel-Micki Fabian and Dean Robinson, both Ione; administrators-Phyllis Danielson, Heppner, HES principal, and John Sebastian, Irrigon, A.C. Houghton Elementary principal; confidential employee-Kevin Mossman, Boardman; Heppner-Lexington Advisory Committee-Mike Armato, Heppner; Boardman-Irrigon Advisory Committee-Debi Straton; Ione-Lexington Advisory Committee-Ralph Morter, Ione; board of directors-Julie Weikel, Gary Frederickson, Pat McNamee, John Rietmann and John Renfro.

Kemp, Lexington, and

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You Are Invited To Our Open House
Friday, December 14th
Come join us for cookies, coffee and cider!

HOLIDAY GIFT SALE STILL GOING ON!

Morrow County Grain Growers

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