

HEPPNER

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**ALL NEWS AND ADVERTISEMENT DEADLINE:
MONDAYS AT 5:00 P.M.**

Deficit forces five-week closure for public health department

The Morrow County Health Department, faced with an almost \$20,000 deficit, will be closed for the month of June in order to balance the budget before the end of the department's fiscal year. All department employees, except for the director, Laura McElligott, will be laid off for five weeks and no immunization or other clinics will be held during that time period. The employees have agreed to not ask for vacation pay during that period. Their insurance benefits, however, will continue to be paid and the employees may apply for unemployment benefits after the first week. Morrow County Judge Terry Tallman said that he anticipated that regular hours and programs would resume in July.

According to Tallman, the deficit was the result of several factors. He said that the health department initially received indications from the state and local government that the department would receive around \$72,000 in reimbursements for state-funded programs, but that figure was whittled to around \$67,000 and then to around \$16,000, partially due to legislative cuts. The health department is reimbursed for state and federal programs after the programs are implemented, much like the school district is reimbursed from the state school fund and hospital

and clinics are reimbursed for Medicare and Medicaid. Another factor, he said was a mix-up in ordering vaccines. Tallman said that the health department ordinarily also orders vaccine for the Morrow County Health District, which operates Pioneer Memorial Hospital, Pioneer Memorial Clinic and the Irrigon Clinic, but this year the district ordered its own vaccine because it wanted its vaccine earlier, unbeknownst to the health department. McElligott ordered the vaccine for both entities which resulted in \$600-\$700 in additional costs. Additionally, "Many people chose to get flu vaccines from Costco or Sentry sub-contractors, rather than wait for ours and many people never ended up getting vaccines," said McElligott. The result was that the department spent more on vaccines than was needed.

Tallman said that McElligott implemented cost-cutting measures, but the department will still remain about \$19,900 in the red for the fiscal year. Tallman said that McElligott has remained within the budget in previous years and the department had around a \$7,000 surplus at the end of the last fiscal year. He said, however, that monies left over at the end of the year cannot be returned to the departments. This year, he said, because of a tight county budget, he had the health

department hold to last year's budget.

Tallman said that while he understands McElligott's desire to help people, "expenditures cannot exceed revenues and when that happens, we've got to take drastic measures. I want to meet people's health care needs, but at the same time, I don't think government can be all things to all people." "It was really hard for Laura," added Tallman. "She was under a lot of pressure. She thought she could get us into the black, but as time went on it just became worse and worse. I'm very sorry it turned out this way." McElligott says that the closure will leave some of the most vulnerable people without services and adds that she is "saddened" that the county will not chip in financially to relieve the deficit, especially when the health department had a \$7,000 surplus of funds last year.

The Morrow County Health Department assists at-risk families starting during pregnancy through "Healthy Start" and "Nurse Family Partnership" and at-risk babies through the "Babies First" program, all home visitation programs, in addition to providing immunization and blood pressure clinics, family planning services, communicable disease investigations and case management and tobacco prevention.

Health department employees were given several options, but, after meeting with Tallman and a union representative, chose the plan which would shut down the department for a five-week period. Another plan would have resulted in retaining the current full-time employees at half time and laying off the part-time employee. The department has nine employees (6.8 full-time equivalent), including the director, registered nurses, office staff and translators.

Saturday night card party

Due to the request of those who enjoy the Saturday night card parties at the IOOF hall in Lexington, Holy Rebekah Lodge will host another card party on May 4 at 7:30 p.m.

The public is invited. Refreshments will be provided and prizes awarded.

Gazette-Times hires new editor



Sarah Collier
The Heppner Gazette-Times has a new editor. Sarah Collier, a native of Heppner, began working for the paper on April 15. Collier is the daughter of Christy Virgil of Lexington and

Wayne Bourrie of Baker City. She was born in Heppner and attended grade school there through the first grade. She then moved to Hermiston, and then to Baker City, where she graduated high school in 1997. Collier attended college at Eastern Oregon University in La Grande for three years before taking a job teaching kindergarten at Baker Valley Christian Assembly in Baker City.

Sarah and her husband, Jamie, have two children, Lynzie, 2; and Michael, 5 months. Jamie is employed at the Red Lion Hotel in Pendleton as the banquet manager. The Collier family now lives in Heppner.

"I'm very excited to be here," says Collier, "it's great to be in my hometown again working at a job that I love."

Health district votes to enter new agreement with Boardman physician

The Morrow County Health District voted unanimously Monday night against extending the district's current contract with Boardman physician Dr. Robert Boss. The contract expires Sept. 1, 2003. The board, however, said they would like to enter into a new agreement with Dr. Boss and the physician's assistant he employs and would consider purchase of the Boss' clinic building, land and equipment. The board indicated that their preference would be to hire Dr. Boss as an employee, much like the contracts the district has with the district's physicians in south Morrow County, and invited him to respond with a proposal at his earliest convenience.

In other business at the meeting, accounting/business office department head Nicole Mahoney reported that the district ended March with a \$7,638 profit. The district had a \$50,819 lost for February and a \$217,615 loss for the year.

Mahoney also reported that the district is changing the clinic billing system which will make it easier for patrons. She said that once the system is operational, clinic billing will be done in-house and patients will receive one bill from the district which would include clinic charges as well as hospital charges. Currently patients receive separate bills for clinic and hospital charges.

At the meeting, he board authorized a change in the district's credit cards. Previously

the district had one card, which not only made it difficult for authorized employees to use the card, but authorized employees were sometimes not aware that the card had reached its credit limit. From now on the district will have one credit card for purchases with a \$10,000 limit, one for staff travel with a \$5,000 limit and one for the administrator, also with a \$5,000 limit.

The board also debated changing the district's accounting system. Board member Ed Glenn wanted to have expenses and revenues separated for each facility, for example, Pioneer Memorial Hospital, Pioneer Memorial Clinic, Boardman Ambulance, Irrigon Ambulance, Irrigon Clinic, etc. Administrator Victor Vander Does added that he already reviews each department regularly. "I know where you're losing money and where you're making money," he said. Vander Does further said that Pioneer Memorial Hospital's recent designation as a Critical Access facility would change the district's financial situation in numerous ways that have not yet been determined. He recently attended a Critical Access conference in Washington, D.C., at no cost to the district, which he said was extremely helpful. He added that the district was already at a "base level of staffing." "I can't cut anywhere," he said. "Everything's so intertwined that if I take one out, it affects the other areas." The

board, also at the advice of their accountant, instead voted four to one, with Glenn voting no, to retain the current system with a review of each facility's revenues and expenses at the end of the year.

The board also agreed to use remaining USDA loan funds to improve the Irrigon Clinic, including paving the parking lot, putting in a new sidewalk and updating signage and equipment, and then perhaps improving the front entrance to Pioneer Memorial Hospital with a portico and other improvements. Mahoney said that the district looked into using the remaining funds to pay off the USDA loan, but will not be permitted to do so. USDA said that the district has to spend the money, Mahoney said. The district is also looking at replacing district vehicles, which are all at least 10 years old. If the cars are replaced with newer models, the district expects to save money on gasoline and repairs.

The board unanimously approved the 2002-2003 budget with resources and expenditures of \$6,341,056. The budget adopted for 2001-2002 was \$7,077,588. Out of the 2002-03 budget, collectible taxes are estimated at \$629,565.

Vander Does reported that the assisted living center construction is on track and is expected to open by August 1. The district will provide administrative services for the center.

Heppner hosts Centennial students



Heppner High School rodeo participants show Centennial students how to tie goats.

By Merlyn Robinson

It was a weeklong lifestyle change for 30 of Gresham's Centennial Middle Students who were hosted by Heppner families during the last week of April. Meanwhile, Heppner's eighth graders experienced metro activities while staying with Gresham families.

For over 20 years, this annual exchange has helped to give students a better understanding of the people who live and work in vastly different areas of the state. The trade works both ways—urban bustle and neon lights versus wide-open spaces and hands-on agriculture experiences.

Gresham students had a woody experience when hosted by the Forest Service. After learning about forest service management practices they were treated to an outdoor hot dog roast at Anson Wright Park. Another tour featured farming operations at where they examined "monstrous" machinery needed to grow wheat on thousands of acres.

Some Gresham students didn't seem to appreciate the smell of burning hair and the sight of calves being castrated at the Anderson and Rietmann cattle ranch, as they learned about necessary livestock practices. Following that experience they were taken to the Morrow County



BMCC and Walla Walla Community College show Centennial kids how to rope.

Fairgrounds in Heppner. The Morrow County Livestock Growers hosted a hamburger barbecue after which they were treated to rodeo event demonstrations.

Showing off their steer wrestling, calf roping and team roping cowboy skills to an appreciative audience were the following college athletes: Ryan Matteson, Heppner and Blake West, Union, both Walla Walla Community College rodeo team members; and Travis Carmine, Condon, Duke Williams, Redmond, and Levi Day, Redmond, of the Blue Mountain Community College rodeo team.

Heppner High School rodeo participants Lacey Matteson,

Ashley Ward, Meghan Bailey and Madison Bailey gave a fast-paced demo on barrel racing and pole bending. Centennial students not only had a hands-on opportunity with live horses, they also participated in stick horse barrel racing. Others took lessons in roping on the ground while live goats were used to perfect the art of goat tying.

A tour of processing plants and dairy farms in the north end of Morrow County accentuated the county's major role in food production, from the field to the table—providing food for thought to urban students.

(Editor's note: impressions of Centennial and Heppner students participating will appear in subsequent issues of the G-T.)



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