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Nichols joins Morrow County Health District

By Autumn Morgan

Russel Nichols says he has always wanted to live and work in Heppner. Now he does as a new doctor with the Morrow County Health District.

Dr. Nichols was born in Portland and raised in the Gresham area. He received his degrees from Oregon State University and Oregon Health Sciences University. Nichols completed his residency training in Spokane.

For the last year Dr. Nichols has been working in emergency in central Oregon. Before that, he worked for seven years in his own practice in John Day. "I have always wanted to come to Heppner," said Nichols. "I like the community. It's just what I expected." He has been filling in when needed in Heppner for the last nine years.

Russel Nichols

Dr. Nichols says he enjoys the outdoors, especially hunting and fishing. Nichols said his first deer hunting trip was when he was one month old. He also enjoys playing golf and is planning on joining the Willow Creek Country Club.

Nichols and his wife, Toni, have three children: Hunter, seven, Madelyn, five, and Trevor, three. They are also expecting their fourth child in August.

He specializes in family medicine but also enjoys sports medicine.

County Court says no to health district loan request

By April Sykes

The Morrow County Court, at their regular meeting July 23, did not approve a construction loan for the Morrow County Health District to remodel the hospital. Of the county judge and two county commissioners, Judge Terry Tallman, Boardman, abstained from voting on "advice of counsel" because of a conflict of interest--his wife works for the health district; Commissioner Ken Grieb, Heppner, made a motion to approve the request, but the motion died for lack of second from the other commissioner, John Wenholz, Irrigon.

The health district had asked for $250,000 from the county equity fund to remodel the hospital to accommodate long-term swing bed patients and thereby retain five to seven jobs. According to the loan application, the health district proposed to finance the $925,000 hospital renovation with a $540,000 bank loan, $73,885 in donations and grants, $61,115 from the health district, the $250,000 equity loan from the equity fund. The loan request had earlier received 4-1 approval from the equity fund's banking committee, said Vander Does.

According to Wenholz, the equity fund was created in 1993 when Oregon Veterans Department land in north Morrow County was sold to RDO (Offutt) and then subsequently purchased by the Nature Conservancy. Wenholz said that at that time $500,000 was set up as a loan fund for gap financing. The fund has since grown to over $600,000. He said that the loan asking cap, originally $50,000, was raised to $90,000 and then only last week eliminated.

Since the fund's origin in 1993, however, only one loan has been made from the fund—to Morrow Development for $50,000 to leverage a $500,000 USDA loan. Another loan, $90,000 to Miller Manufacturing in Heppner is currently pending until some "hurdles" can be resolved, said Tallman and Wenholz. Wenholz told the Gazette-Times that they "may not have done a good enough job in getting the info out" about the loan fund.

Wenholz said that he did not second the motion approving the loan to the health district because he believes the health district "has other means of financing" and objected to using half the fund monies for only one loan. "I would like to see several small businesses have the opportunity to use this money, especially with the way the economy is slowing. If we loaned out half the money, pretty soon the loan money is gone," he said. "We are trying to stimulate small business through growth in our community."

"I'm not negative about this, but I believe this money needs to go to small businesses. I have a problem with $250,000 of this fund going out in one chunk," Wenholz reiterated, stressing that "this isn't a "political issue." Wenholz was defeated in his bid for another term as commissioner by Leann Rea of Boardman.

Tallman said that Wenholz "did leave the door open to reconsider the issue in the fall."

Wenholz and his son Jeff, speaking with the Gazette-Times Monday, suggested an alternative loan source for the health district through a rural utilities loan program and Columbia Basin Electric Co-op. Jeff Wenholz, a member of the Umatilla Electric Co-op Board, said that the Umatilla Electric Co-op approved a $300,000 zero-interest loan to Good Shepherd Community Hospital in Hermiston through REDLG, a USDA rural economic development loan program.

Fair & Rodeo Princess Torri strives to be like her mom

By Autumn Morgan

Torri Lovgren wants to be like her mother. Step number one involves being a Morrow County Fair and Rodeo princess. Step number one can now be checked off that list as Torri has been named a princess for the 2008 Morrow County Fair and Rodeo Court.

Torri was born in Pendleton and raised in Heppner. She is the daughter of Pat and Bobbette Lovgren. Bobbette was on the Morrow County Fair and Rodeo Court as a pennant bearer for two years and a princess for one year.

Torri has enjoyed her reign as a princess. She has attended many parades and luncheons. Her favorite event so far has been the Elgin Stampede, but she is especially looking forward to the Morrow County Fair and Rodeo events.

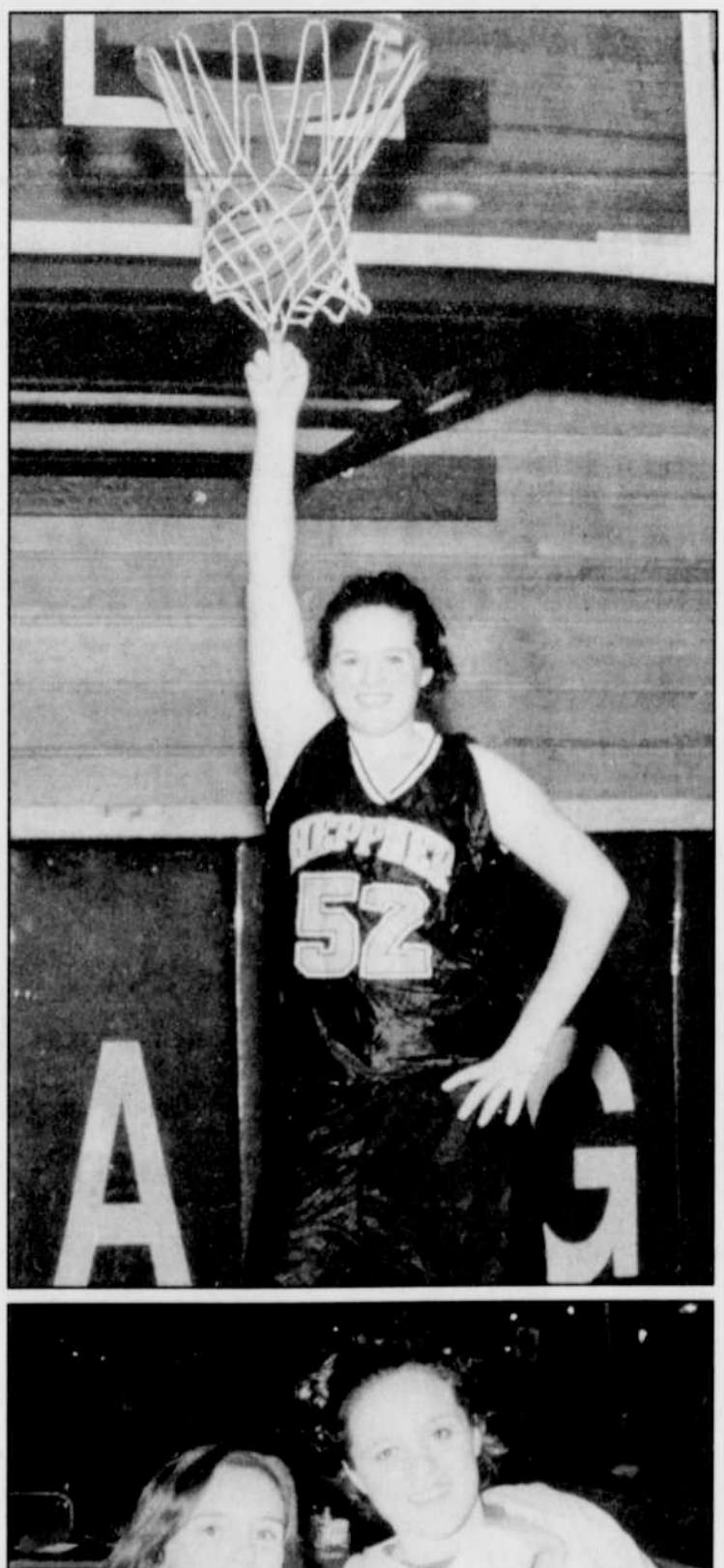
"It's a lot of fun meeting new people," said Torri. "It's fun advertising the fair and rodeo." Torri attended a fashion show in Boardman. She especially remembers attending the Morrow County Grain Growers election of new officers, the first event where the court was announced.

Torri is riding a horse named Bob that she is borrowing from a neighbor. She is planning on buying him. "Bob has a little bit of an attitude," said Torri. "But he is still sweet." Torri originally planned to ride her horse Roper. But plans had to be changed when Roper pulled a muscle and could not be ridden.

The fair and rodeo court has a few different outfits that they wear. Torri's favorite is a black pair of pants and a red shirt.

Torri, who will be a junior at Heppner High School next school year, plans on attending Eastern Oregon University after high school. She wants to pursue a degree in agriculture education to become an ag teacher. She would also like to play college basketball.

Torri plans to be roping at rodeos next year. She also is planning to apply to be the queen of the Morrow County Fair and Rodeo Court.



Top photo is Princess Torri Lovgren. Bottom photo is Torri with her sister, Hanna.

Hospital remodeling should be finished by fall

By David Sykes

Construction at the Pioneer Memorial Hospital in Heppner should be wrapped up by October, the Morrow County Health District Board of Directors was told Monday night.

The remodeling has made it so noisy in parts of the hospital some staff have been forced to change offices. Administrator Victor Vander Does told the board the remodeling was going pretty good so far with only a few problems. He said the contractor has been easy to work with and most problems are being worked out. The project will enable the health district to better accommodate long term care patients.

The clinic is also set for remodeling with new exam rooms, new equipment and upgraded office space.

In other business the board discussed their disappointment with the Morrow County Court not approving their loan application from the county equity fund (see related story in this week's Gazette). The board was disappointed in that it will cost the health district over $50,000 more in interest. The district will find other sources of funds but will have to pay a higher interest rate.

The board also discussed the upcoming vote to extend a tax levy for the health district. An action committee to work on passage of the levy has been formed and so far David Sykes and Barbara Hays of Heppner have agreed to serve on the committee. The election will be held November 4 with ballots to be mailed out in mid-October.

Other business included a report that the district will hire Palmer Roofing to fix the hospital roof for $62,725.

The board also discussed an upcoming effort by the city of Boardman to establish an urban renewal district. If passed the board was told each county-wide taxing district would lose a percentage of its tax income. The health district's portion would be $6,535 per year for 22 years.

The board also passed a resolution to borrow $790,000 from the Bank of Eastern Oregon for 15 years at 4.5 percent interest. The loan includes an original $540,000 and the $250,000 it did not receive from the county equity fund.

Meeting to be held for proposed treatment facility

A meeting is set for the community to hear about the secure treatment facility proposed for Heppner today, Wednesday, July 30, at 6:30 p.m. at St. Patrick's Senior Center.

Presenters will be Tim Mahoney, manager of the Umatilla Treatment Facility; Kimberly Lindsay, director of Community Counseling Solutions, formerly Morrow-Wheeler Behavioral Health; and Rod E. Estes, development specialist with Lifeways. A question and answer session will be held after the presentations.

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