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Concern for district spurred yes vote on tax increase, Smith tells Chamber

By David Sykes and Andrew Sykes

Representative Greg Smith, one of only two Republicans to cast a yes vote during the last legislature in favor of a new state tax increase, defended his vote last week by saying it was for the good of his voting district.

Smith, who resides in Heppner, told the Heppner Chamber of Commerce last Thursday that his decision to vote in favor of the tax increase secured over $18 million in state spending to come out of the Democrat controlled house into his district. In an often emotional talk to the Chamber, Smith said he voted in favor of the tax increase because he was concerned about the possible closing of Eastern Oregon University, the consolidation of Extension offices into one Northeastern Oregon block, possible cutbacks in Health and Human Services, public safety and education.

Rep. Greg Smith

Smith and Bob Jensen of Pendleton were the only two Republicans to vote for a tax increase on individuals making more than $125,000 annually, or families making more than $250,000. Their votes were crucial to the Democrats to get the measure passed in the last state legislature.

In exchange for his vote the Democratic controlled Oregon legislature promised him the following would be included in the final state budget:

- **$8 million** in lottery money for Blue Mountain Community College.
- **$8 million** in lottery money for Eastern Oregon University Library
- **$2.3 million** in state bonds for Port of Morrow Education Center.
- **Limiting cuts** in the Oregon University System to benefit agricultural extension centers and the ranger resources program. He also asked for support for extending a tax break on logging equipment.

In justifying his yes vote Smith told the Chamber his research had shown that the tax increase would only affect between 35 and 52 people in his district.

Smith and the Democrats now have a new obstacle in getting the tax increase enacted however, as last week a group of citizens filed a petition with the Secretary of State to have the tax placed on the ballot for voter approval. The group, called The Taxpayer Defense Project, turned in more than twice the needed signatures to have the tax measure placed on the ballot January 26, 2010 for voter approval.

Meanwhile fallout from Smith's vote has reached into the May 10, 2010, primary election, as Colleen MacLeod of LaGrande declared last week she is running against Smith for the House District 57 seat. MacLeod is a Republican who served three terms as Union County commissioner and was a field representative for Oregon Republican Rep. Greg Walden. MacLeod has also been active in the Association of Oregon Counties and the National Association of Counties. She and her husband, Alan, run a small coffee roasting business in Summerville, about 16 miles north of LaGrande. Smith has served five times in the Oregon House, and told the Chamber last week he has received quite a bit of encouragement from his constituents. And at the conclusion of last week's talk he received an enthusiastic round of applause from the Chamber of Commerce. Heppner resident and Chamber member Cliff Green told Smith he was glad he did what he did for the district.

Back in June not long after the crucial vote in the legislature Smith had told the same Heppner Chamber of Commerce: "My job is to roll up my sleeves and do the job for the people back home, and I am not ashamed of that. Our communities are dying and I am doing what I can to support our communities, and every item (that was promised) has merit. I have to come back and explain what each of these (projects) will mean. People are going to tell me what they think at the ballot box," he told the Chamber in June.

Caldwell hired as new HHS teacher

New to the staff at Heppner High School this year is Matthew Caldwell.

Matthew Caldwell

Born and raised in Sacramento, CA, Caldwell and his wife Kristen currently live in Hermiston. Kristen is also employed with the Morrow County School District as an 8th grade language arts teacher at Riverside High School.

Caldwell attended college in Portland where he received his undergraduate degree from Oklahoma Christian University. He also received his master of arts in teaching degree from Concordia University in June 2009.

During the time the he was in Portland, Caldwell was a youth minister at Eastside Church of Christ. And though he says he had not always wanted to be a teacher, it was during this time that he began substitute teaching and, he says, "I decided I loved teaching." He was a substitute teacher for 1½ years and taught one math class at Columbia Christian High School. He completed his student teaching at Corbett High School.

This is the 25-year-old's first full-time teaching job. He is teaching junior high math, high school business, and yearbook.

Caldwell's first day was September 21. "Coming in one month into the school year can be tough," said Caldwell. "But I feel very supported. I don't feel like I have been left in the dust. This has been a positive and exciting experience. My expectations were exceeded in coming here, both by the administration and the students."

Thursday flu clinic cancelled

The Morrow County Health Department flu clinic has been cancelled for Thursday, October 1, due to a lack of the regular flu vaccine.

North Morrow Times to publish final issue

Lynn Prag, co-publisher of the North Morrow Times in Boardman, has announced that the next issue will be the final issue for the newspaper.

Prag has been publishing for 16 years.

Boardman clinic seeks $100,000 from Morrow County Health District to fund new clinic building

By April Sykes

Mindy Binder, executive director of Columbia River Community Health Services, and Lynn Prag, CRCHS Board chair, appeared before the Morrow County Health District Board meeting Monday night in Boardman to request $100,000 for the CRHCS building fund.

CRCHS operates a federally funded migrant health care clinic in Boardman which had received from $70,000 to $140,000 yearly in MCHD funds, with the exception of last year because the health district's previous levy had expired and the new levy had not been received.

The previous sticking point for the health district board had been that CRCHS had not been forthcoming in providing their annual audited financial report. The health district had requested the report from CRCHS as a prerequisite for providing operating funds for the clinic. Prior to the establishment of CRCHS, the board also unsuccessfully requested financial reports from Dr. Robert Boss, who sold his medical clinic building to CRCHS and continued on as a physician with them. Ed Glenn of Boardman, representing CRCHS, previously denied a request by the Heppner Gazette-Times for financial reports, saying that the operation was not required to divulge that information.

Binder announced that Dr. Boss was stepping down as a physician with CRCHS as of December 31, but will be continuing on as medical director. His departure as a practicing physician with CRCHS will leave the clinic with three providers-one physician and two physician's assistants.

Binder said that CRCHS had 11,500 patient visits in the previous year.

MCHD Board members agreed that CRCHS needed new facilities and praised them for the services they provide to Boardman area residents, but Monday night did not request audited financial reports from CRCHS as they had previously. The board appeared favorable to providing the $100,000, but they opted to wait and see if CRCHS received federal funding for the project. If the federal funding was not approved, the consensus of the board was to reevaluate the funding request at that time.

CRCHS requested a $1 million loan from USDA and $2,370,178 from the Health Resources and Services Administration for its "capital campaign", $200,000 from the Ford Family Foundation, $200,000 from the MJ Murdock Charitable Trust, and $341,840 for capital equipment from HRSA in addition to the $100,000 from MCHD and other monies from a variety of other resources. CRCHS received $475,405 from HRSA for operating funds on May 15 of this year and requested a $497,303 grant from HRSA on September 3.

Binder said that they plan to go forward in requesting a USDA loan for clinic construction and, if funding is received, break ground on the new clinic in late spring or early summer next year. "Make no mistake," said Prag. "We are going to guild a new clinic."

Boardman EMT Bruce Kirkendall asked the MCHD board to not commit the funds to CRHCS at least until CRCHS had received confirmation that federal funds had been approved. Kirkendall said that Boardman EMTs' equipment was not up to par and said he believed that the monies would be better spent in providing better equipment and more funding for EMTs, rather than giving the monies to the Boardman clinic. "I see other areas where we are short and lacking . . . staff, volunteers and equipment. Some equipment is just junk," he said. He also raised questions about the need for a new building. "Is this the best use for these monies?" he asked.

The district currently provides funding for two paid EMTs in Boardman and one in Irrigon. Boardman has two ambulances provided by MCHD.

Also at the meeting, MCHD CEO Michael Blauer introduced Barbara Wallner as the new nurse practitioner for the Irrigon Clinic. "I'm excited to start," said Wallner. "I'm very fortunate to be here." She said she planned to visit the clinic this Wednesday and start work on Thursday.

Also at the meeting, Prag, who is also co-publisher of the North Morrow Times, the Boardman newspaper, announced that the paper's next issue would be its last, due to increased costs. Prag said she had been publishing the paper for the last 16 years.

In other business, the board:

-heard a report from Molly Rhea, Director of Nursing, Home Health and Hospice, who said that the district has had difficulty in recruiting nurses and especially certified nurse's assistants. She also said that the entire staff is on a provider list for the H1N1 (swine flu) vaccination and the staff has been vaccinated for the regular flu. She said that in the event of an epidemic, MCHD has some Red Cross cots, but, she added, "We're already short staffed." In addition to Rhea, the district currently has only five registered nurses and Home Health and Hospice has four. "We do have some issues," concluded Rhea. She said that she has learned that the state has specified that currently only people hospitalized with the flu will be tested for the H1N1 virus, but, she added, hospitalization of flue patients would increase exposure to other patients and hospital staff. She said that one solution would be to teach people to take care of themselves at home.

-learned from Chief Financial Officer Nicole Mahoney that the district owes $191,000 back to Medicare as a reimbursement for overpayment to the district. She said that Medicare calculates the district's reimbursement at one rate and then reassesses the rate later, sometimes resulting in a hefty repayment for the district. "It was to my huge surprise that we would owe so much back," said Mahoney, who attributed it to an increase in "swing volume." She said that situations like this were testimony as to why the recent tax levy was needed.

-learned from Blauer that no bids for the Pioneer Memorial Clinic remodel were received. He said that they plan to re-bid the project and also have a contingency plan.

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The Heppner Gazette-Times wants to see pictures of your trophy animals from this hunting season. Stop by to have your picture taken, drop off photos, or email them to editor@rapidserve.net.

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