

Morrow County School District escapes staff, program cuts

By April Sykes

Morrow County School District Superintendent Mark Burrows told the board at their regular meeting in Lexington Monday night that there will be no staffing or program cuts for the upcoming year, in

sharp contrast to many school districts which have been forced to make drastic budget cuts. "I'm not asking the board to make any draconian cuts," said Burrows, who qualified his statement by saying "unless the governor" cuts the state education budget further. He said that the district has a higher than normal cash carryover that it can rely on and has not spent the federal stimulus monies it received. He also credited patron support through the local option tax approved earlier. "Every month I thank the patrons," said Burrows.

Burrows told the board that the district was not cutting its budget in the event that more money became available, through the state or federal government. While the district is not cutting programs, nor losing staff, it is, however, taking some cost-cutting measures. Burrows said that an English language learner teaching position they hoped to fill will not be funded, new cars to replace older models will not be purchased, some textbooks will be adopted, but not purchased, and \$90,000 will be cut out of the maintenance budget. He also said that the district will reduce its contingency by almost a quarter of a million dollars.

He told the board that the district has joined a consortium which will give the district a zero percent interest on the Riverside High School HVAC (heating/ventilating/air conditioning) project, which will also save the district money. The project completion date is set for the end of August.

Also at the meeting, the board approved a one-year contract with the Morrow County Education Association (the teachers' union) which provided for no salary increases, with the exception of step-raises, which kick in when an employee has been with the district a certain number of years or when the employee completes a specified amount of additional education.

The contract with the teachers was modified to include an insurance opt-out for the employees. According to the agreement, "active employees who maintain and provide proof of another medical benefit plan may opt-out of district-sponsored health insurance coverage. Employees who opt out of health insurance coverage and who are otherwise eligible for a district contribution towards insurance premiums may receive 50 percent of the employee's maximum district insurance contribution as a contribution toward a district-sponsored health reimbursement arrangement, as long as such contribution would not create disadvantageous tax consequences for the district or the employee."

The district currently pays \$982 per teacher for insurance. If an employee opts out of the district insurance plan, \$491 will go monthly into an insurance pool and will be divided among the remaining active employees enrolled in OEGB plans.

Opt-out decisions must be made at annual enrollment and the pool will be based upon opt-outs at annual enrollment.

The agreement specifies that eligible employees who don't maintain and provide proof annually of another employer-sponsored group medical plan will not be permitted to opt out of the district-sponsored group insurance coverage. Burrows said that the plan would create no extra expense on the district's behalf.

Other aspects of the one-year successor agreement between the school district and the teachers include the following:

*Employees' personal life: "The personal life of an employee is not the appropriate concern of the board unless it can be shown to be impairing the effectiveness of the employee in his or her work assignments. (Update is as follows) "Employees do recognize than' an Oregon licensed teacher must meet the standards of Teacher Standards & Practices Commission and OAR 584-20-0000-0035-the Competent and Ethical Educator."

*Employee hours: Regular building hours for teachers shall be 8-1/2 hours for the four-day student week and 7-1/2 hours for the five-day student week. On the last student day of the week and the day preceding a school vacation period, teachers may leave one-quarter hour after dismissal of students. Teachers shall request permission from their administrator or when deviation from these hours is necessary. "Modification to the workday for PLCs or similar workgroups may be made at the building level by a two-thirds majority vote of teachers."

*School calendar and school work year: "It is understood that teacher presence is highly valued at student/parent activities. Teachers' participation in their building's student/parent events is strongly encouraged."

*Professional and educational development: tuition reimbursement: "The employee may submit for tuition reimbursement prior to receiving a transcript, but must do this on or before May 15."

In other business, the board:

-learned from Burrows that the administrators requested an audience with the board concerning their contract. He added that he believed that the administrators' proposal was budget neutral.

-discussed the first reading of a policy concerning non-resident status students with regard to admission, tuition and attendance. Burrows said that the new policy would allow him to make decisions about student variances without having to refer each instance to the board. Board member Craig Miles voiced some objections to the proposed policy. "I hate seeing a governmental agency like us taking over parental rights," he said. "The family should have

more right to decide where their child goes to school." Board member Bill Kuhn, who sought changes to the current policy and provided input to the proposed policy, said he thought the variance policy should be defined to a greater extent.

-approved the following employment action: resignations/retirements: Judy Brown, A.C. Houghton Elementary School third grade teacher, Christina Bettesworth, Riverside High School ed assistant, Kristen Caldwell, RHS middle school language arts, Michael Cates, Windy River Elementary/Sam Boardman Elementary PE; employment-Leah Thompson, SBE teacher, increasing from half-time to full-time, replacing Alison Ogden.

-approved the following extra-duty (non-coaching) positions: Heppner Elementary School-Talented and Gifted program coordinator-Jannie Allen and Pam Dowdy; DART-Karen Smith-Griffith, English Language Learner site coordinator-Mary Ann Elguezabal; Heppner High School-annual-vacant; half-time band -Joe Lindsay; half-time rally advisor-Virginia Grant; drama (one-play only)-Jodi Chapa; Talented and Gifted and DART-John Flaherty.

-approved the following extra-duty coaching contracts: Heppner Junior High: head football coach-Chad Doherty, assistant football coach-Dennis Peck, head volleyball coach-Mindy Wilson, assistant volleyball coach-Madison Rosenbalm, head boys' basketball-Mike Ehrsam, assistant boys' basketball-vacant, Head girls' basketball-Mindy Wilson, assistant girls' basketball-Anna Conklin; head wrestling-Ken Bailey, head track-Stefanie Sweeney, assistant track-Larry Palmer; Heppner High School-athletic director, head football coach, head golf coach-Greg Grant, assistant football-Les Payne, assistant football-Kevin Payne, head volleyball-Pam Dowdy, assistant volleyball-vacant, head boys' basketball-David Norton, assistant boys' basketball-vacant, head girls' basketball-Mark Dowdy, assistant girls' basketball-Chris Rauch, head wrestling-Mark Lemmon, head baseball-Jim Kindle, assistant baseball-Scott Coe, head track-Melissa Coiner, assistant track-Jason Palmer, head softball-Petra Payne.

-approved designating the following organization details: superintendent/clerk/custodian of funds/check facsimile signature/budget officer/designee to apply and sign on grants and contracts/set fidelity bonds at \$75,000 -Mark Burrows; assistant superintendent/special ed coordinator/designee to apply and sign on grants and contracts-Phyllis Danielson; ELL director-Joe Chavez; deputy clerk/business manager/custodian of funds/facsimile signature/designee to apply and sign on grants and contracts/set fidelity bonds at \$75,000-Rhonda

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City of Heppner launches new web site

The City of Heppner has a new web site at www.cityofheppner.com.

"As an experiment (and a cost savings for our citizens) we are going to begin posting more things at the web site rather than pay for paper, postage and labor," said City Manager Dave DeMayo. DeMayo said the city quarterly newsletter for spring of 2010 will be placed on the web site before the end of June. He said the city will only mail the newsletter by normal mail if requested by a citizen.

DeMayo also asked people to provide the city with comments after they have used the web site. "We would like to do more things on the web in the future if this proves useful to

our citizens. We know that not everyone feels comfortable using a computer, and we are willing to accommodate this need if you let us know," DeMayo added.

"Welly Toss" incorporated into Celebrate Heppner event



The "Welly Toss" competition was held during this year's Celebrate Heppner event. In addition to the individual competitions, team competition was also held. See Page FIVE for complete results. -Photo by David Sykes

Heppner co-gen plant may burn sorghum to produce electricity



Ceres President Richard Hamilton, a self-proclaimed "recovering molecular biologist" who stands at 6-foot-6, is dwarfed by his company's fast-growing high biomass sorghum. Ceres applies the knowledge gleaned from research on the human genome to plants, making large-scale production of biofuels possible while minimizing impact on food supply.

Editor's note: The above picture and caption were taken from the Ceres Company web site. The California based company produces high biomass sorghum seed of the kind that might end up being used to grow fuel for the former Kinzua co-generation electric plant located near Heppner.

By David Sykes

The co-generation plant at the former Kinzua mill site may end up burning high biomass sorghum to produce electricity, the Heppner City Council was told Monday night.

Kurt Christensen, president of Renewable Ag Energy, Inc., told the council his company is interested in assisting a growers' co-op in purchasing the co-gen plant from the Port of Morrow and operating it using the sorghum. He said the sorghum would

most likely be grown in the Hermiston area, but that he had contacted a couple of local growers to see if they might be interested.

Christensen is from the Treasure Valley area of Oregon and is working on a similar project there. He asked the council for its support and indicated he has a 90-day option to purchase the 10-megawatt facility.

Christensen said he had also met with David Mitchell, a former operator at the plant, to learn all he can about its condition and operation. Christensen said he has some concerns about the condition of the boiler, but feels there aren't any problems that cannot be overcome.

"We have 90 days to do our due diligence and then if everything looks

good we will move forward with the purchase and hopefully be operating in the fourth quarter of this year or the first of next year," he said.

He said, when operational, the plant should employ three people per shift with one supervisor position. The plant will run 24 hours per day and with trucker jobs probably have 20 people employed. He did not say how much the jobs would pay, but that they would be "above average."

Christensen said the Port of Morrow is offering them a good deal on the plant, and it also included the planner building which he has plans for but did not divulge what they were. Christensen also

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