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Association says national health care law would be good for rural areas

Local administrator says complete effects not clear yet

By David Sykes

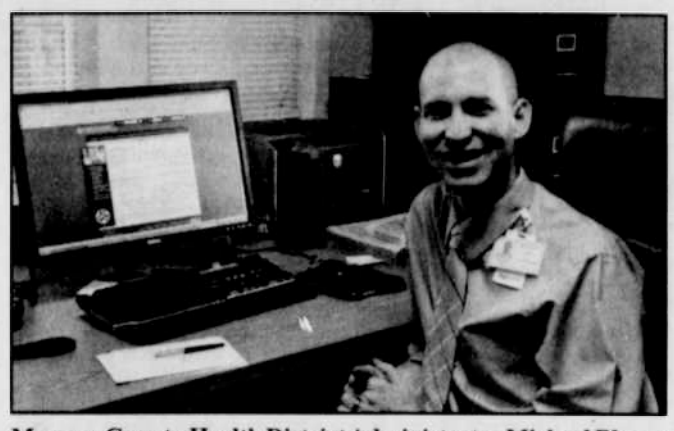
A federal judge in Florida Monday ruled President Barack Obama's entire health care overhaul was unconstitutional because of the provision mandating that Americans get health insurance starting in 2014.

The ruling puts the future of the legislation in doubt. However, prior to the ruling the Heppner Gazette sat down with Morrow County Health District Administrator Michael Blauer to discuss the bill, officially known as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, but more commonly called "Obamacare", and its effects on rural health care.

To start with, Blauer said it was too early to tell the complete effect of the legislation on rural hospitals and health care, but he did lay out some of the positive and negatives he sees in the legislation.

"In a lot of ways the reform would be good for us because it would cause more people to become insured," Blauer said, "and that would mean more revenue for us." He said more people in rural areas tend to be uninsured than in urban areas, a fact backed up by the National Rural Health Association (NRHA), which Blauer cited as a resource he uses to gauge the effect of the health care legislation on our local health district.

The NRHA says in the smallest and most remote rural areas the uninsured rate is 23 percent, compared to an urban rate of 19 percent. "A lot of what is going on now (with the new law) has to do with insurance and the insurance companies. What we have seen from health care reform has dealt with the insurance side of the business," Blauer said. He said he felt the direct effect of medical care and other issues for rural health district would come out later as the law unfolds.



Morrow County Health District Administrator Michael Blauer says national health care law could help rural districts' bottom line with more insurance payments. The law was ruled unconstitutional by a Florida judge Monday. *–Photo by David Sykes*

If there are cuts in Medicare coverage or payment under the new law that would "be a concern for us," Blauer said, as 56 percent of the medical district's revenue comes from Medicare. In comparison, 12 percent comes from Medicaid, 36 percent from commercial, only nine percent from self pay and one percent from workman's compensation. He said if there is insurance reform and more people are covered, there would be fewer times the district would have to absorb the cost of treating people who do not pay their bills.

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Locals question ODOT on fixing extreme curve at Horseshoe Bend

Trucks over 50-ft long not allowed

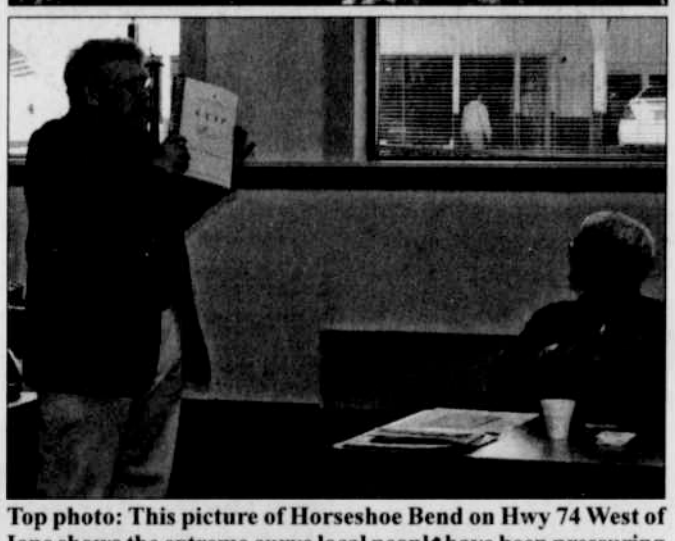
By David Sykes

Is it possible that extreme corner on highway 74 West of Ione known as Horseshoe Bend will ever get straightened out?

That question was once again put to officials of ODOT (Oregon Department of Transportation) who were guest speakers at the Heppner Chamber of Commerce last week. "You have heard this many times before, but can something ever be done about Horseshoe Bend?", Heppner resident John Edmundson asked Tomas Strandberg, Public Information Officer for ODOT.

Strandberg said the amount of traffic on that portion of highway did not justify the cost involved in straightening it out, and that is the main reason it has not been fixed. Flashing lights and signs have been added to warn drivers about the corner. "We have bottlenecks all over the district, but we are hurting because of a lack of funds," said Ken Patterson also of ODOT who also attended the meeting.

Daye Stone of Heppner said it is an economic issue for the area especially with the wind farm development that is coming. "Economically you can't drive a 50 foot truck down that road," he said. Strandberg urged local people to stay involved. "Stay engaged," he said.



Top photo: This picture of Horseshoe Bend on Hwy 74 West of Ione shows the extreme curve local people have been pressuring Oregon Department of Transportation to fix for many years, came up at Chamber of Commerce last week.
Bottom Photo: John Edmundson (right) looks on while Thomas Strandberg of ODOT explains the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program. Edmundson later questioned Strandberg about Horseshoe Bend west of Ione.

Strandberg also explained how highway funding in Oregon works, saying it all comes down to the STIP, or Statewide Transportation Improvement Program. "That is how projects get funded, get into the STIP," he said. "Someone may get passionate about what needs to be done and brings it to out attention," he told the Chamber. He urged people

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Les Schwab works on upgrades

Les Schwab employees (l-r) Richard Schmidt, Manager John Gould and Ian Heard show work being done on new drive in area at Les Schwab Tires in Heppner. The company is putting in new lifts out front along with a new concrete drive in area. Inside, the cement floor of the front work area was also completely torn out and replaced, which will improve drainage and also make for a more level work area, Gould says. The manager also said a different style scissor lift will be installed out front in place of the older tube style. Gould said the improvements should be completed in about a week. Meanwhile they are servicing customers behind the store. *–Photo by David Sykes*

Tom Shear resigns from Ione Schools

By April Sykes

The Ione School Board accepted the resignation of Tom Shear, art and shop teacher, at the January 25 regular meeting.

ISD Principal Jerry Archer commented that Shear was a "great individual", as a teacher and a person. "I don't know where else you would find an art/shop teacher. We're really going to miss him," added Archer.

Also at the meeting the board received information on the diploma requirements. To receive a regular diploma, a student must have four English/language arts credits; three mathematics (with the class of 2014 required to take algebra I and above); two science classes (three credits for the class of 2010 and above); one physical education credit, one health credit; one second language, the arts or career and technical ed credit; nine electives (six starting with the class of 2012) for a total of 24 credits.

To receive a modified diploma, students must have four English/language arts credit, two mathematics, two science, two social sciences, one PE, one health, one second language, the arts, career or technical;12 electives-24 credits.

For an extended diploma, students must have two English/language arts credits; two mathematics; two science; three social science; one PE; one health; one second language, the arts, career and technical ed-12 credits, not including more than six credits earned in a self-contained special education classroom.

Superintendent Mark Mulvihill said that all students receiving diplomas may walk in graduation exercises and no one would necessarily know which diploma the students receive. However, students receiving modified diplomas and below would probably not get into a four-year college.

In other business at the meeting, the board:

-heard a presentation from Mary Apple on a possible agenda for the charter school summit planned by the ESD on March 8 from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., tentatively set at the Pendleton Convention Center. The draft agenda includes sessions on charter school law, board configuration, policies, fiscal information, Division 22 standards, special populations, licensure, innovative charter schools, virtual schools, transportation, federal grants and a

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Health district approves over $587 thousand for federally mandated electronic records hardware and software purchase

By April Sykes

Morrow County Health District Board approved a proposal to purchase electronic medical records hardware and software at a cost of around $587,569 from a company called Healthland. The district is complying with a federal mandate to change from paper patient records to electronic.

Chief Financial Officer Nicole Mahoney said that she believes that the purchase will be around 90 percent reimbursable with federal funds, resulting in a cash outlay of around $125,000 for the district.

However, in the interim, the district must pay for the equipment and software up front and sought a loan to that end. Monday night the board approved a $500,000 24-month loan proposal from the Bank of Eastern Oregon. BEO President Jeff Bailey said in a letter to the district that the bank would loan the funds at a 4.25 percent interest rate with a $2,500 loan fee. Mahoney said that the district inquired about obtaining a loan from two local banks and two national companies but commented, "They couldn't come close to the BEO offer."

The district has to obtain prior approval from USDA, which is not anticipated to be a problem, said Mahoney.

District CEO Michael Blauer said that Healthland has been good to deal with. "We've got a great deal on the table," he said.

Blauer also told the board that Pioneer Memorial Hospital's new CT scanner has been delivered and is expected to be up and running by February 8.

Also at the meeting the board appointed David Burns from Irrigon as the new board member, replacing Linda LaRue. Board Chair Larry Mills told Burns that the board welcomed him on board and appreciated him "stepping up and representing Irrigon", but reminded him that although he is from Irrigon, he represents the entire county. Board positions are

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Attorneys agree to no bail for Crum

During the pretrial hearing at the Morrow County Courthouse on January 27 for Steven Crum, Defense Attorney Cara Davis and Department of Justice Attorney Andrew Campbell agreed to no bail at this time. Crum, who appeared via video, was indicted by a grand jury on October 12 on the counts of Murder with a Firearm – Pregnant Victim; Murder with a Firearm; Unlawful Use of a Weapon with a Firearm; and Aggravated Theft in the First Degree. He is currently lodged in the Northern Oregon Regional Correctional Facilities in The Dalles.

The body of 30 year old Jessica Killian was found on October 4 on the Crum property off Ella Road near Ione.

Another pre-trial date has been set for May 12 at 9 a.m. Trial readiness is set for November 10 and trial is set for December 5-16.

Come on Down!
Open House February 4th
Free Lunch 10:00 AM -2:00 PM
Hamburgers & Hot Dogs
Open House Special - January 31st-February 4th-
All Case & Fleet Guard Filters 20% OFF
Limited to stock on hand
Morrow County Grain Growers
Lexington 989-8221 • 1-800-452-7396 For farm equipment, visit our web site at www.mcgg.net