

Changes ahead for county government

County judge position eliminated, county administrator to be hired

By **Andrea Di Salvo**

Morrow County government will undergo some drastic changes in the wake of a decision by the Morrow County Court recently.

At its Sept. 16 meeting, the three-member court voted unanimously to eliminate the long-standing county judge position. The position will be terminated at the retirement of current Morrow County Judge Terry Tallman at the end of 2016. The commission intends then to have three part-time commissioners and hire a paid, full-time county administrator. The current structure has two part-time commissioners and one full-time county judge, with no administrator.

The two county commissioners said the heavy workload on the county judge was a major factor in their decision to make the change.

"Our county's growing to the point that the judge can't take care of judge duties and administrative duties both," said county commissioner Leann Rea, who cited "windshield time" spent on the way to meetings as one roadblock to productivity.

Commissioner Don Russell agreed.

"I think the county's getting big enough that we can't continue to elect a lay person," said Russell. "Personally, I don't think that some things were getting done that an administrator would do. This allows three part-time commissioners

to not deal with day-to-day operations but to set policy and maybe even go to Salem to lobby for things that are important to the county.

"Look at the three largest cities in our county—Heppner, Boardman and Irrigon—and they're all run by paid administrators," he added. "The mayor and the city council don't deal with details of the day-to-day operations."

While the vote was unanimous, judge Tallman said he still has his doubts that it was the right move.

"It was not an easy decision for me to make. I still have mixed feelings about it. I think there's more than one way to address that issue," he said, adding that he thought the problem could have been solved by hiring an assistant for the judge. "Give it a year and see how we feel," he added.

Another decision recently made by the county court is to move the responsibility of juvenile court cases from the county judge to the Sixth Judicial District, which serves both Morrow and Umatilla counties. Unlike the other vote, this decision was not unanimous, with county judge Terry Tallman providing a dissenting vote against the change.

Commissioners Russell and Rea say they voted for the change largely because it will save the county money. The county currently

has a budget of \$40,000 for lawyers, but the state pays for lawyers in circuit court cases.

"We're already paying taxes to the state for the circuit court to do this," said Russell.

Another consideration was relieving the county judge of the time commitment involved in juvenile cases. The only other three counties in the state in which the county judge has jurisdiction over juvenile cases are Wheeler, Gilliam and Sherman counties, all of which have populations significantly smaller than Morrow County, which has a population of approximately 12,000.

Russell said he talked to multiple people from various agencies during the decision process, including Morrow County District Attorney Justin Nelson, current and former county sheriffs, district judges, previous county judges and others.

"I just talked to everyone I could think of who might have an opinion on it. And then I just tried to talk to a lot of people on the street about it," he said.

Tallman cited several objections to the removal of juvenile duties from the county judge, including loss of local control, less time in court, the need to develop a legal infrastructure in Morrow County, and even inaccuracies in Russell's report.

"My biggest concern is that I think the judgeship

Heppner celebrates homecoming



Heppner celebrated homecoming last week with plenty of festivities as well as victories on the volleyball court and the gridiron. Pictured back L-R are Junior Princess Emily Cecil with father Raymond Cecil, Senior Princess Sydney Maben with father Jason Maben, Senior Queen Jessica Kempken with mother Donna Sherman, Senior Princess Riley Kollman with father Brian Kollman, and Junior Princess Riane Dompier with father Jon Dompier. In front (L-R) are Kolby Currin, first-grade pennant bearer Jett Stewart, Patrick Collins, first-grade pennant bearer Maya Payne, C.J. Kindle and Logan Grieb. —Photo by Sandra Putman

South Morrow schools see slight decline in enrollment

Both Heppner and Ione schools have seen a slight drop in enrollment for the 2015-16 school year.

While Morrow County School District Superintendent Dirk Dirksen reports that enrollment is up district-wide, enrollment in Heppner schools has dropped slightly.

Heppner Elementary reported 188 students enrolled last year but only 173 this year. That was due in part to last year's unusually large kindergarten class—the 29 students that enrolled in 2014 made it the largest kindergarten class in several years. Enrollment is down only slightly this year, with 22 kindergartners enrolled at HES.

High school enrollment

is also down, though not by much. Last year's high school enrollment was 167 compared to this year's student body of 161.

At Ione Community School, enrollment numbers are down slightly school-wide, with total enrollment of 204 compared to 213 last year.

Lower numbers can be seen in the entering kindergarten class, which contains 11 students compared with 17 last year. Overall elementary numbers have dropped, from 102 last year to 75 this year, while middle school is up from 31 to 48.

High school enrollment is holding steady, officials report, down only one from last year's 80 students.

Ballots go out soon for November election

Ballots go out Wednesday, Oct. 14, for the Nov. 3 general election. The last day for voters to register for the election is Oct. 13.

The issues on the ballot for Morrow County this year are strictly local in nature, affecting only the Heppner and Lexington areas.

Heppner and other residents of the Heppner Rural Fire Protection District will vote on a bond for a new fire hall in Heppner, while Lexington residents will be presented with the renewal of a five-year local option tax for the Lexington Fire Department.

All ballots are due by

8 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 3, and must be received, not simply postmarked, on that day. For voter convenience, 24-hour drop boxes will be available in Heppner and Lexington. Locations are as follows:

Heppner: Courthouse parking lot (24 hours) or the Morrow County Clerk's Office, Room 102 inside the courthouse. Open 8 a.m. to noon and 1-5 p.m., M-F and Election Day (Nov. 3) from 7 a.m. until 8 p.m.

Lexington: 365 West Hwy 74 (Public Works Parking lot). Turn off Hwy. 74 onto Tom Street and left into the public works parking lot. Open 24 hours.

Health district hires interim administrator

District passes audit with flying colors

By **April Sykes**

Bob Houser, retired John Day hospital administrator, has accepted an offer from the Morrow County Health District Board for an interim position as district administrator at a salary of \$180,000 a year, plus the use of the district house and other benefits. The board has filled the CEO position temporarily until a permanent administrator is hired. The district has been operating without a permanent CEO since the resignation of Dan Grigg in June. Chief Financial Officer Nicole Mahoney has been acting as CEO, in addition to her other responsibilities, since Grigg left to take a position in Burns.

If hired, the interim CEO would begin Nov. 1 and would be employed for

at least three months.

Also at the meeting, Eric Volk, CPA, senior manager with WIPFLI CPAs and Consultants, presented the district's 2015 audit, which showed no deficiencies. Volk praised Mahoney and her staff for presenting the financial data for the audit.

The audit showed the district had a net increase of \$294,247 for the fiscal year ending in June 2015, compared to \$319,127 for 2014, and \$905,928 for 2013. Gross patient revenue increased by \$954,864 in 2015, compared to a decrease of \$234,958 last year. Net patient accounts receivable increased \$1,436,949 for 2015, compared to \$1,123,481 last year and \$984,375 in 2013. Net non-patient revenue, which in-

cludes property taxes, increased by \$192,833 this year, compared to \$146,288 in 2014. Total operating expenses increased by \$565,277 this year, and \$687,936 last year.

The district's total assets for 2015 were \$6,999,761, with \$2,939,714 in liabilities; in 2014, total assets were \$6,734,458, compared to total liabilities of \$2,968,658; total assets in 2013 were \$6,686,424, compared to \$3,239,751 in total liabilities.

Total operating revenue for 2015 was \$8,041,299; with operating expenses of \$6,430,235 in salaries and benefits, \$572,493 in depreciation and amortization, \$891,726 for supplies and \$1,463,853 for other operating expenses, for total operating expenses of

\$9,358,307; with non-operating revenue of \$1,476,290 in property tax revenue, \$10,945 in interest earnings, minus \$84,076 in interest expense, plus \$30,527 in donations and non-capital grants and \$177,569 in "other" for \$1,611,255 in total non-operating revenue; net position at the beginning of 2015 was \$3,765,800, compared to \$4,060,047 at the end of the year.

For 2014, the district had \$7,612,460 in total operating revenue, \$8,793,030 in total operating expenses,

\$1,499,697 in total non-operating revenue, net, with a net position of \$3,446,673 at the beginning of the year, and \$3,765,800 at the end of the year.

The board also accepted the low bid of \$48,825 from Cougar Excavation, Wamic, OR, for re-routing and replacing four four-inch sewer lines which exit the hospital and connect to the six-inch main line going into the city's sewer main. Specifications also include cutting and removing the retaining wall, asphalt and concrete patio, trenching

and replacing all sewer lines specified in the request, backfilling all trenching, installing new cleanouts with new cast-iron covers and concrete retaining rings flush with surface, including applying for necessary permits and replacing existing retaining wall using the 6x16 concrete garden wall blocks and replacing the concrete patio with sod. Cougar Excavation's bid for the reduced project option two, which did not include replacing the existing

—See HEALTH DISTRICT/PAGE SEVEN

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