

Neighbors complain still no cleanup of fire-destroyed house

'Smells so bad we can't sit outside'



A fire gutted house on Linden Way has still not been removed

By David Sykes A home destroyed by fire on Linden Way in Heppner on April 1, still has not been knocked down and cleaned up, and the neighbors are complaining.

Jay Keithly lives next door to the destroyed home and he says the smell is so bad he and his wife cannot sit outside and enjoy their yard. 'It's been over a month and nothing has been done,' Keithly told the Heppner city council Monday night.

Keithly said he called the insurance company trying to find out when it is going to be knocked down and cleaned up, but so far has gotten no answers. 'Frankly I'm surprised it's still standing,' he said of the completely gutted structure. He added he is holding back on doing some repairs to his house next door in case there may be additional damage during clean up.

Jim Healy, a relative of the owner of the home, was also at the council meeting and said he hasn't heard when the structure will be cleaned up. Others in the audience said its condition is so bad not only is it a smell hazard but if kids were to get inside someone could get hurt.

City Attorney Bill Kuhn said the city could send a letter to the insurance company to try and speed things along, and also suggest that the city could start the cleanup and then lien the property for the cost if the insurance company

doesn't pay.

In other business the council signed a contract with newly hired city manager Kraig Cutsforth. Cutsforth, 58, comes to the job with a wide range of experience in both government and the private sector, including a stint as Burns city manager and seven years on the Hermiston City Council.

Cutsforth takes over from his sister Kim Cutsforth who has served previously in the same position and is currently the interim manager. His first day on the job was May 1 and the council had his contract ready at Monday's council meeting.

Under his contract Cutsforth will receive \$54,000 per year plus benefits. The term of the contract is "indefinite".

One member of the audience questioned the council's procedure for hiring the new manager. Jim Healy said hiring the brother of the interim city manager could cause trouble for the city. He asked if Kim Cutsforth was on the hiring committee that chose her brother for the job. She was not he was told. 'Maybe you guys should have thought about it a little more,' Healy said. Several members of the council and Kraig Cutsforth said they did think about it and it would not be a problem. 'We feel very confident about our decision to hire Kraig Cutsforth,' said Councilmember Dale



Kraig Cutsforth New City Manager

Bates. In other business Cutsforth told the council he had an evaluation done on the city hall heating system and it needs to be replaced. He estimated the cost would be not more than \$50,000. The council voted to have him move forward with getting bids on the project. Cutsforth said energy savings realized from the new system would pay for itself in 10 years.

In other action the council voted to give city employees a cost of living pay increase for the next fiscal year of 2.1 percent.

In other business the council discussed the condition of the RV park in Heppner across the street from the motel. Councilmember Dave Gunderson said there is a strong smell of dog excrement and rotten food when walking by the park and he wondered what could be done about getting it cleaned up. There was also talk about the general conditions at the park having deteriorated over the years. The council agreed they did not want to cause a business to shut down or leave town but thought there must be a way to improve the conditions there. People are living long-term in the park which is owned by the same people which own the motel across the street and the gift shop in the front. 'It's a horrible thing going on there. People are not paying rent,' said citizen Jim Healy at the meeting. He said the owners are nice people and are letting some people live there rent free.

'Not enough hours in the day' to enforce property violations, says county planner

'We could do nothing else,' McLane tells commissioners



Policing trash and debris filled properties around the county could be a full-time job.

By David Sykes

There is such a backlog of property violations across the county, "There are not enough hours in the day to do all the code enforcement," County Planner Carla McLane told the Morrow County Commissioners last week. By code enforcement McLane means violations such as piles of trash, old wrecked car bodies and mobile homes, and also a large number of places with people living permanently in recreational vehicles, which is illegal.

The planning commission, along with the Morrow County Sheriff's Department, is responsible for identifying code violations, contacting property owners and following up with enforcement actions if necessary. McLane says her staff is not big enough to do all their regular planning work and also do a complete job of code enforcement. She says currently once per month a staff person will go out and follow up on complaints. Discussion on code enforcement came up at the last county commission meeting mainly because of previous complaints of people living in recreational vehicles for longer periods of time than allowed by law. McLane says the county currently has 32 cases being investigated across the county of RV living. "Many times, it comes down to a test of wills," she says. The property owners say no one is permanently living in the RVs, then investigators go inspect and there are electrical and water hook ups, TV satellite dishes and other obvious signs of

permanent occupancy at the RVs. The problem is so pervasive she said, "Pick a road, any road, and you can find violations."

Identifying code violations now is mostly driven by complaints, usually by neighbors. Neighbors will call, not only about RV living but also properties that are piled high with trash and garbage and needing clean up. She says her small staff is only scratching the surface. "I don't know what to do," she told the commissioners.

"When you have some people with 50 abandoned cars, they don't have the money to clean them up," Commissioner Don Russell said. "We let them go on for years and then it only gets worse," McLane agreed. "It took us 25 years to get here and it will take us 25 years to turn the boat around. It all depends on how much resources do you want to devote to it," she says.

Obviously frustrated with the problem, McLane said she "looks forward to a conversation on how this county does code enforcement." Commissioner Jim Doherty said he thought action would come when the people of Morrow County, and not just the government, want something done about code enforcement problems.

In other business the commissioners heard from department heads who wanted the new facilities being built in Irrigon to include break rooms for the employees. Including breakrooms in the new building plans had appar-

ently been questioned by one of the commissioners.

"It's part of doing business. You have a microwave, refrigerator and a place for people to eat," said Sheriff Ken Matlack, who pushed for including the rooms in construction. He said his department sometimes has people who cannot leave the building during their shift and have no other place to eat. "It's something that has always been done."

County Planner McLane said they currently don't have a break room at the planning building but would like to see one at the new building. "I hope there is an understanding of the taxpayers of Morrow County that they would appreciate their employees enough to provide a place for them to eat lunch," she said. Commissioner Melissa Lindsay said she was not opposed to having break rooms or questioning the costs but was glad to hear the department heads' explanation for them. Russell said employees can expect to have a breakroom with the basic appliances included in the new building construction.

In other business the commission discussed having a goal setting workshop for commissioners to be held by a professional facilitator. The county received two proposals from professionals and it would cost between \$2,000 and \$5,500. The workshop would help establish county-wide goals and improve team building in the county.

Remember to vote by May 21

Completed ballots for the May 21 election must be received by 8 p.m. on election day. Postmarks do not count. Drop boxes are available in each community in Morrow County.

According to Bobbi Childers, Morrow County Clerk, eligible voters for the 2019 election consist of 1,844 in Boardman, 2,315 in Irrigon, 407 in Lexington, 424 in Ione and 1,302 in Heppner for a total of 6,292 eligible voters. The

2017 special election had 5,664 eligible voters.

There are currently only 1,161 ballots returned, for a voter turnout of 18.4 percent. The 2017 voter turnout was 23.99 percent.

Ballots may be dropped in Heppner 24 hours a day at the drop box in the Bartholomew building parking lot. Ballots may also be dropped in the county clerk's office, room 102, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to noon and 1

p.m. to 5.

The Lexington ballot drop box is located in the public works parking lot at 365 W Hwy 74.

In Ione, the drop box is located on Spring Street, in front of the turn onto Third Street.

Outside drop boxes are currently open 24 hours, but all drop boxes will close at 8 p.m. on election day. Ballot drop boxes are also located in Boardman and Irrigon.

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