

County eyes COVID-19 budget adjustments

‘Our health department needs help,’ says Lindsay

By David Sykes

County Health Department staff are becoming overwhelmed with COVID-19 pandemic work and will be needing more money in their budget, County Commission Chair Melissa Lindsay said last week. She said funds will probably have to be shifted from other county departments to cover the increased costs to the health department of dealing with the virus.

Morrow County has the second highest per capita rate of infection in the state, and the strain of dealing with testing, contact tracing and now lost time with staff actually contracting the virus (see related story), is stretching a health department budget not prepared for this pandemic. When the budget committee drew up the county budget no one knew the extent of the virus infections or how it would affect the county. “Everyone is overwhelmed. They have been working consistently over 40 hours a week and weekends. They just cannot keep up. We are going to have to make a decision pretty quick,” County Administrator Darrell Green told the commissioners several weeks ago about hiring more health department staff.

“This fall could be a huge increase (in virus infections),” Lindsay said at their meeting last week. She said watching the news she thinks “much, much more” is coming. “We need to do a real budget. I think that if we are going to need this kind of work out of the health department then we are going to have to pull back from other departments,” she speculated. Lindsay even suggested that the budget committee may be called back into session to make needed adjustments to adequately fund the health department. Specifically, how much will have to be shifted into the health department was not yet laid out, but Finance Director Kate Knop did say the commission could make up to 10 percent disbursements changes to other departments without budget committee approval. It was also brought out that the county will probably not receive as much lottery or other state money as was anticipated at budget time.

Whatever the amount, because of the uncertainty and fast changing characteristics of the virus, there is little time to waste, Lindsay said. “The conversation is going to have to start



The county will not purchase the emergency services building it has been leasing from the Port of Morrow at the mill site. A business has plans for locating there. -Photo by David Sykes.

happening. What kind of resources are we prepared to put on this? We are going to have to focus dollars on the health department that are focused somewhere else,” she told the other commissioners.

At a July first meeting Green had said the department especially needs more contact tracers, who locate and talk with patients, assist in arranging for isolation and work to identify people who the patients have been in close contact with. Staff was short then he said, even before at least one health department member became infected with the virus. Three health department staff members have symptoms of COVID-19, and one tested positive for COVID-19 and had close contact with the other two staff members who are ill. The two close contacts are presumed to have COVID-19 and are included in the county’s overall case count. All three staff members are home in isolation, as recommended by Oregon Health Authority (OHA) guidance.

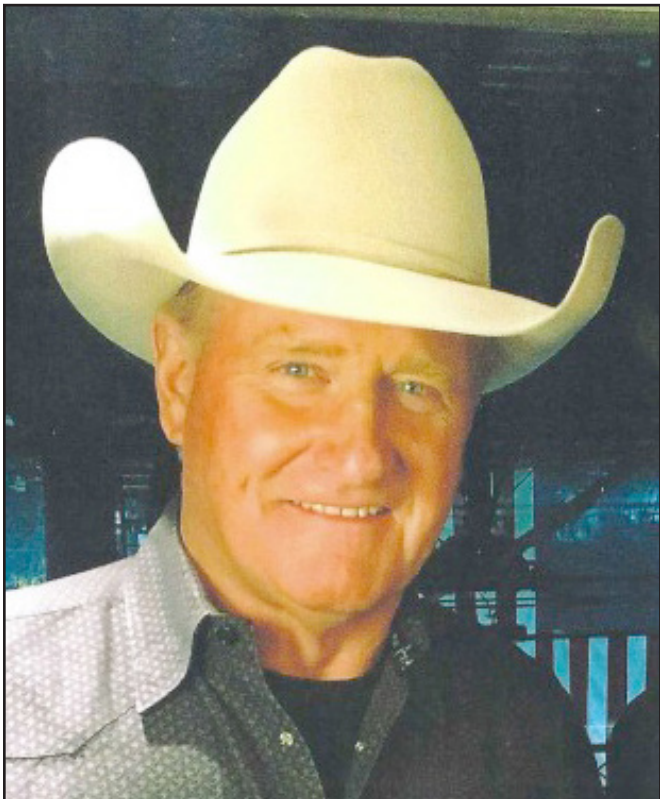
Morrow County was recently put on a list of the top eight infected counties in the state, and Commissioner Don Russell said unlike some other county such as Lake, we deserve to be there. “Morrow County’s numbers are bad, and we deserved what we got,” he said of the designation. “I don’t see how we can complain about being on the list. We are second worst in the state per capita. We are managing it the best we can, and we know where the majority of the outbreaks are coming from,” he said. Russell said Morrow Coun-

ty is unique in the virus and are handling it differently. He pointed out that the county has had successes handling the infections within the Boardman food processing plants. He did not feel the county should be punished by having our restaurants closed down because the restaurants are not the problem.

In other COVID-19 related issues Lindsay gave a report about a grant program that may become available through the state and Tillamook Cheese. Lindsay said she had become aware Tillamook is attempting to set up a program to make funds available for main street businesses in Morrow County. The Boardman cheese processor would put up \$100,000 to be matched by the state and wanted to know if Morrow County wished to become involved by adding to and increasing the grant money. Tillamook also needs a government entity to sponsor the program. Lindsay said it looked like a good opportunity to help COVID-19 impacted local businesses and she had verbally committed to adding \$50,000 of county development fund money which would make \$150,000 available for matching from the state for a total of \$300,000 available to county businesses. “I feel good about this,” Lindsay said. “Tillamook will write the grant and we will be the fiscal agent.” She said this could be a really good thing to help local businesses. The other commissioners agreed and even suggested increasing the county’s participation to \$100,000.

In other business the

Knowles inducted into Hall of Fame for Pendleton Round-Up



Butch Knowles, Heppner, inducted into hall of fame.

Heppner resident Butch Knowles has been inducted into the Pendleton Round-Up and Happy Canyon Hall of Fame, along with two other people and a horse. The inductees will be honored during the 2021 Pendleton Round-Up and Happy Canyon.

Knowles was the saddle bronc champion in 1986 and 1991 at the Round-Up. He qualified for the saddle bronc event at the National Finals Rodeo four times and won the average at the NFR in 1987. After winning the National High-School All-Around title in 1973, Knowles went on to compete at Walla Walla Community College, where he won Northwest Regional titles in bareback, saddle bronc, bull riding and all-around.

After retiring from rodeo, he became a rodeo commentator and has also been part of the live broadcast team for the Round-Up for the past 34 years. He is best known for being the commentator for the NFR telecasts from 1989-2019.

Knowles was inducted into the hall of fame along with long-time volunteers Mary Hines and Jack Shaw as well as Badger, a quarter horse with an extensive Round-Up background.

the service. “This will give added safety to our vans for the public. Another layer of protection for the dept and the county,” Imes told the commissioners. Total cost of the cameras including installation and software was \$27,000, half of which was paid by the federal grant.

In other Loop business Imes reported that the Loop is continuing to operate with “Essential Rides Only.” She said drivers and riders are required to wear masks and maintain a social distance of six feet. “In order to maintain the six feet, riders are required to sit in the back seat. For some of our riders this requirement has shown difficulty with safely boarding and exiting the vehicle. In seeing the difficulties with this requirement, I have set up a clear plastic barrier in the vans to allow for the middle row seats to be used for our riders. Our drivers are continuing to be diligent with sanitizing The Loop vehicles,” Imes reported to the commissioners

Imes also reported on the current driver status: “Heppner has zero drivers with the exception of Jack Lytton who transports one Heppner resident when needed and will drive bus when we are able to have senior gatherings again. Boardman has one driver and Irrigon has two drivers with one driver on break. I would like to announce our newest driver, Dixie Earle in Irrigon. She and her husband are retired business owners.”

county continued to discuss the possibility of putting videos of the commission meetings online for public viewing. The meeting is accessible in real time through the Zoom platform, but recordings may be made available through YouTube or on the county web site. Legal issues of whether the recordings would replace written minutes, and how long the videos would have to stored have to be worked out before the county commits to posting recordings.

In other business, the commissioners received notice that the Port of Morrow has received an offer from a business to purchase the Sheriff’s Station 2 building located at the Old Mill site in Heppner for \$100,000. The property is approximately one acre on which the current Emergency Services building is now located. The county currently leases the building and property from the Port for \$5,500 per year and as part of the lease had a First Right of Refusal. The First Right gave the county the option to purchase the property for the same price as the sale agreement. The county voted not to exercise its option to purchase. “The

county has been leasing this for quite a few years now,” said Commissioner Don Russell who was also previously a Port board member. “The Port has received an offer to purchase. We have 30 days to invoke our First Right of Refusal (FRR),” he said. Russell said if the county were to take the FRR then he understood the Port would redraw the purchase offer and terminate the counties lease, which under the terms it had the right to do. “The Port wants to do some economic development in South Morrow County, and this is their opportunity,” Russell said. He and all commissioners were in agreement and the motion not to evoke the FRR passed unanimously. Details about the business moving into the Port will be announced later.

In other business, the commission heard from The Loop coordinator Katie Imes that she received a grant to help purchase new cameras for the transportation vehicles. The Loop serves Morrow County veterans, seniors, person with disabilities, with limited, or no transportation and the 12 cameras will be placed in vans used by

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