Last private land in county now in a fire district

3,862 acres added to Boardman Rural Fire

By David Sykes

Calling it the last private land in "no-man's land," 3,862 acres between Boardman and Irrigon have now been included into a fire protection district. The addition became final following a public hearing Sept. 16 before the Morrow County Commission.

"I think this is all the private land that is not covered and is in no-man's land," Commissioner Don Russell said on the request to include three parcels into the Boardman Rural Fire Protection District. The action means fire protection on the property will now be the responsibility of the fire district. Previously no fire district was responsible. All other private property in the county is already covered by various rural fire districts.

Russell, a 25-year member of the Boardman Fire District Board of Directors and knowledgeable about fire districts in the county, said the only property in the county not now covered by fire protection is land owned by the Federal Government, and the Union Pacific Railroad rights-of-way in the north end of the county.

Russell explained that to take care of fire coverage the railroad has two options. "They can either pay property taxes on their rights-of-way or pay for fire services. They have fires occasionally on their right-of-way and they call the local fire department," he said. "They are then billed for the service and they pay. That's their option."

The new property added to the fire district includes 3,632 acres of farm land owned by the Stahl family eight miles east of Boardman, 10 aces of industrial land also in the same area owned by Eastern Oregon Processing, and 220 acres of farm land also in that area owned by Columbia Basin Real Estate, LLC.

After discussion on the addition of the land to the district, the commissioners voted unanimously to approve. The Boardman Rural Fire Protection District had earlier given its okay to the addition, but a public hearing and county approval was needed to finalize the action.

County okays vehicle purchases

In other action at the Sept. 16 meeting the commission authorized the purchase of two 2021 Polaris sportsman 4 wheelers for use by the Sheriff Office at the County's Off Highway Vehicle Park located in the mountains south of Heppner. The ATVs will be used to patrol the 300 miles of trails on the 8,200-acre park.

Cost of the two all-terrain vehicles is $9,300 with $7,440 of the cost being paid by Oregon State Parks. Morrow County will pick up the remainder at $1,860. Three bids were received for the ATVs with the Morrow County Grain Growers in Lexington coming in the lowest.

In other purchases the county authorized the purchase of a 2021 Dodge Ram Crew Cab 4X4 pickup for $28,886 for use by the Sheriff Office. As part of its agreement with the city of Heppner to provide police protection and services, Heppner will pay for the vehicle. It will be used by the Sheriff's Office on patrols and then after three years, the city will take ownership, without attached police equipment and attachments. "It's a good system for the county and it has worked out well for the city," Undersheriff John Bowles said in requesting the purchase authorization. The commission voted unanimously in favor.

Wind farm to install alternate tower lights

In other business the commission heard that an alternate aircraft lighting system for the new Wheatridge Windfarm towers recently constructed in the county will not be operational until the first of the year. The lighting system, called the Aircraft Detection Lighting System (ADLS), is installed on top of each tower for a warning to aircraft in the area.

Other windfarms constructed with the traditional aircraft warning lights are red and blink on and off continuously. Many people consider the always on blinking lights a visual nuisance. Morrow County, with the urging of Commissioner Russell, requested that NextEra Energy consider placing the ADLS on the new Wheatridge Windfarm thus reducing "light pollution". According to one company that sells the system "ADLS vastly reduces the impact of aviation obstruction lights on local wildlife and communities while preserving the dark sky."

The lights will only come on and start blinking when an aircraft is detected in the area. The system is safe as it maintains continuous, reliable 360-degree monitoring of the airspace surrounding a wind farm, allowing aviation obstruction lights to remain off until an aircraft is detected nearby. Once the aircraft enters the designated wind farm safety zone the system automatically activates the necessary obstruction lights and then turns them off once the aircraft safely exits the area. The majority of the time when the lights are not needed, they will remain off. Commissioner Russell, himself a pilot, has been pushing for the system since it was announced that the new windfarm would be built in Morrow County.

During discussion of the lights, David Lawlor, director of development for NextEra Energy Resources, owner of the Wheatridge Windfarm, said although the windfarm is scheduled to go online this month, the company did not expect the ADLS system to be activated until the first of next year. "We have not yet received FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) approval of the ADLS and the manufacturer is backlogged for delivery of these types of systems. Nevertheless, we have installed the ADLS compatible lighting in each tower and have completed system design. Additionally, we will be installing all foundations and conduit to facilitate the final installation and commissioning of the ADLS," he said in a letter to the county.

Awards janitorial contract

In other action the commission awarded a contract for the amount of $98,935 to Patriot Building & Grounds Maintenance of Hermiston for janitorial services of the county's nine buildings. The county put the contract out to bid and Patriot, who is the current contractor, was the only bidder. The county voted to accept the contract but noted that it is $8,935 over the amount budgeted for janitor services.

Appoints fair board member

The county appointed Braxton Adams to the Fair Board for a three-year term. It was noted that three board members have resigned and, after advertising the position, only Braxton expressed an interest, leaving two other positions still empty.

"I am interested in filling the vacant position on the fair board because I believe it is important role in our community," Adams said in his letter to the county. "I moved here two years ago and have enjoyed becoming a part of this community. My wife and I have a 7-month-old baby that we plan to raise in Heppner. We both are invested in community service to help make our hometown the best that we can. I grew up on a dairy farm in Utah and I've worked with animals my whole life. I have participated in fairs and rodeos since I was a kid. I have assisted with putting on fair rodeos throughout my adult life. I would like to be member of the fair board so that I can contribute to our community and be an active role in making it the best that we can. I am hopeful that my background working in fairs and rodeos will be an asset to the board," Adams said.

$100,000 to Boardman Food Pantry

At its Sept 23 meeting the commission agreed to give $100,000 to the newly formed Boardman Food Pantry. The group plans on using the money to purchase the former Lutheran Church in Boardman and remodel the building into a commercial grade kitchen and food storage center. It is estimated the cost to purchase and remodel the former church building will be $350,000 to $400,000 to convert it for use as a food pantry and kitchen, and Doherty says some private companies have expressed an interest in helping financially. Organizers of the new group said they are planning on having large coolers installed so they can receive bulk delivery of foodstuffs to save cost and distribute to those in need in the community. The center would also teach kids and families to have good nutrition.

Commissioners plan to use of Federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) money funneled down from the state for the donation, however, the county does not have the CARES money yet to pay the Pantry so they authorized an expenditure from the general fund to make the payment. Commissioner then plan on reimbursing the general fund once the COVID money becomes available. Before approving the funding, commissioner Russell want to know if it was sure the Pantry funding would qualify for CARES funding. "I want to make sure this qualifies for reimbursement from CARES," he asked Commissioner Jim Doherty who had earlier advocated for funding the Pantry request. "There is no question on that. I am comfortable this will qualify," Doherty responded. He had pushed for the expenditure, saying he has been in consultation with the operators and they are fulfilling a need in the community that is becoming more acute since the coronavirus epidemic. The commission voted unanimously to approve the expenditure and give the Pantry the money from the general fund.

At a work session later that same day, however, it was revealed there is not enough money coming in from CARES this year to reimburse the general fund for the Pantry donation. In addition, the eligibility of the Pantry to even receive COVID money was called into question. "We have $132,000 left (of the CARES money) and that is to last through December. Is that correct?" Russell asked Finance Director Kate Knop. Knop replied yes and Russell responded that with other commitments from the CARES funding there didn't seem to be enough money left to give to the Pantry. "Isn't this the bucket of money that we promised $100,000 to the Boardman Food Bank out of? How do we do that when there's not enough money in there?" he wanted to know. "I don't have an answer for that," Knop said. "The dollars just don't go that far." She then also questioned the Pantry's eligibility to even receive the funding. "I have a question about the eligibility of paying $100,000 to a Boardman non-profit (the Food Pantry). I don't know how that is directly related to COVID," she told the commissioners. "I have additional questions on that."

Expected state revenue loss

At the afternoon work session the commissioners discussed an expected cut in revenue from the state because of the Coronavirus lockdown. It is estimated the county will receive $ 321,370 less in road funds, $ 26,583 reduction in fair funding, a 50 percent drop in lottery money, and $ 50,921reduction in parks funding expected in state money this year.

Interviewing for new county surveyor job

On October 19 the county will begin interviewing to hire a county surveyor. The position used to be elected but county governments in Oregon now have the option to make the position a hired staff member, which Morrow County did. The county has been advertising for the position since Sept. 28, however, and so far, no applicants. Commissioner Russell said there is apparently a shortage of surveyors "out there." The commission voted to appoint newly hired planning director Tamra Mabbott to be part of the interviewing team for the new surveyor. The salary will be $64,445 per year with $47,141 in benefits. The current elected surveyor Stephen Haddock provided his own equipment on the job and now the county will need to purchase survey equipment. Commissioners received an estimate of $90,000 for survey equipment they will need to purchase, and an additional $12,800 for materials and services for the position.

Purchased portable sawmill

In other business the county authorized public works parks department to purchase a portable sawmill for use at the county parks. Parks manager Greg Close said the $55,067 sawmill will be used for building such things as signs and picnic tables. He said the parks have over 200 tables and there would be a lot of other use for the mill. The county asked for bids and received three. The model is a Timber King and all but $3,423 of the costs will be covered by a state park grant to the county.

Rystedt makes hole in one

On Friday, October 2, local golfer Alex Rystedt made a hole-in-one on hole number three at Willow Creek Country Club. This shot was made looking into a setting sun with a six iron. It was Alex's first ace.

The shot was witnessed by Tomas Elguezabal, Dan Sample and Brian Sweeney.

G-T Trophy Corner

Harley Anderson (16) of Heppner shot her 3x4 buck early opening day in the Fossil Unit.

Kegan Steagall with his 4-point buck taken in the Heppner unit.

Wyatt Steagall with his 4-point buck taken in the Heppner unit.

Pat Schiller shot his buck at the Vey Ranch on Butter Creek.