

Irrigon manager bullish on city and county's future

Says new Enterprise Zone money is 'blessing' to the city and county

By David Sykes

Irrigon City Manager Aaron Palmquist says he likes what is happening in Morrow County and sees good things coming our way not only in 2021 but also into the future. Much of his optimism comes from the new tax money generated by the Columbia River Enterprise Zone, CREZ, and the opportunities for growth and enhancements those dollars are causing. "Regardless of who we are in the county, we need to say this is an opportunity that has come to Morrow County and to our communities, and count it as a blessing," Palmquist says. "Long term it is going to add sustainability and growth opportunities to our cities," he adds.

Most of the new tax money is coming from construction of Amazon data centers at the Port of Morrow in and around Boardman, but also from expansions at the Lamb Weston food processing plant and construction of a new Tillamook Cheese whey processing facility, also at the Port.

Palmquist's bright assessment of the county's future comes on the heels of a recent CREZ disbursement of over \$9.2 million dollars around the county, including a new funding program of \$200,000 to each of the five cities in the county. The new disbursement is aimed at infrastructure spending, mainly to help cities lay plans for new sewer systems.

Palmquist says in Irrigon part of the CREZ funds could be going to continue the removal of 300 septic systems left over in a city that actually has a central sewer plant. "We had 300 septic tanks or effluent tanks still in the system," he says, pointing out the city has already removed 150 septic tanks with those homes then hooked up to the central sewer system. These effluent tanks are a hybrid sort of septic tank that keeps the solids on the property and pumps the effluent to lagoons. It is a system Ione is reportedly looking at to possibly replace their entire town which has complete onsite septic with drain fields at every home. The onsite systems need larger building lots, and the Department of Environmental Quality, DEQ, wants to get rid of them. Lexington also has complete onsite septic systems at every property.

The CREZ extra funding to cities for infrastruc-

ture this year is a departure from the Enterprise Zone's past practice of funding only four categories of spending across the county: housing, education, community enhancement and public safety. The CREZ added the fifth funding category of infrastructure, and gave the cities each \$200,000 with the express purpose of helping them with their sewer problems. Heppner also has a deadline from DEQ to upgrade its system and stop dumping its treated effluent into Willow Creek.

In the long term CREZ will continue to receive millions of tax dollars per year for the next 15 years and is looking to provide stable funding to help cities throughout the county deal with not only their sewer and other infrastructure problems, but also money for economic development groups in the cities, who in turn fund quality-of-life enhancements, and housing projects.

Palmquist sees this stable funding as both a blessing and a boon to the cities of Morrow County, and as an example of the good things happening in Irrigon, points out a new walking path being built from highway 730 all the way to Wyoming Street by the schools. "It's a 10-foot-wide path for cyclists, bikers and walkers and a really nice quality of life addition to our city," he says. The original money came from an ODOT grant applied for six years ago, but the city can use some CREZ money as matching funds for the remainder of the project. He also points to reported interest of a Dollar General store locating in Irrigon. "I think that is the direct result of growth that now is happening in the area," he says.

As with every community, Irrigon is also facing a housing shortage, and Palmquist says with the help of CREZ money Irrigon is tackling that problem in an innovate way. He says the city has a Local Improvement District, LID, program that helps developers fund expensive streets and water and sewers for a new housing development. The high cost of these improvements is what many times holds back development of new building lots. Under Irrigon's unique plan, however, the CREZ dollars help out the LID and make the lots less expensive to put in and then more affordable to home builders. He says the plan spreads

the payments by developers out over more years, and when the money is repaid it goes right back into the LID fund and recycled to more projects. "It's tough to sell property if a developer has to add another \$20,000 onto a lot price," Palmquist says. "That doesn't sell lots very well, but if they have a LID, they can spread the cost over 10 years. With the city having the money it can then be lent at a very low rate. When the money comes back in it goes right back into the fund and can be used again," he points out. Palmquist says he thinks the city will see more housing opportunities coming to Irrigon with the innovating program, meaning more growth. And Irrigon is also ready to ask the Port of Morrow for assistance on new housing developments, just as Ione did on their Emert Additions.

Speaking on the politics of the now expired by still generating funds CREZII board and the formation of a new CREZIII, Palmquist says he hopes the process stays similar. He says he likes the past CREZII policy of giving money directly to cities, economic development groups and taxing districts and letting them decide how the money is spent specifically. He likes the idea of adding a fifth category of spending for infrastructure and hopes the CREZ continues resisting giving money for "asks." Asks are when a particular group or organization comes directly to the CREZ to ask for money instead of going through cities or economic development groups, most of who have well publicized plans to disburse the funds. Palmquist says if CREZ begins accepting "asks" from small groups or organizations it would open a flood gate that will turn the process into a political grab bag and slush fund. He feels disbursement of the funds should also be based on population, since cities in the county with more people have higher infrastructure needs.

With the millions of new dollars coming into the county it is possible that CREZ "could become too political," he says, and recommends the new CREZIII set up the five disbursement categories, and that they continue to use population figures in their funding decisions. "I think if it is going to one of those five buckets that will be great and we can avoid a lot of problems in the county," he says.



Irrigon City Manager Aaron Palmquist is optimistic about the future and sees good things happening in his city and around the county.

He does advocate to continue giving extra money directly to the City of Boardman, the county and the Port as was done this year as they are the three CREZ members and bear the brunt of the new business development costs. "That was new this year (funding the three members) and I commend them for the process they did," Palmquist says. "There is going to be more money coming down the road and I think those three entities should get extra funding. The port needs the money because they are having the

growth; Boardman needs the money because they are the epicenter for the majority of the development, and then the county gets some too. Should they get it equal? Yes, they should," Palmquist says emphatically.

He does think the CREZ process of awarding the yearly money should be "codified" with the new CREZIII rules to "set the standard and be very clear," on how the money will be disbursed around the county. He feels this will alleviate a lot of the politics and cut down on "power plays"

around the county, which he says would not be beneficial and divide the county.

"It's been clear to our city council that every dime, every dollar that comes from the CREZ is considered a blessing and an opportunity to improve and it is not a guarantee," Palmquist says. "Some people in the county think it is owed them. It's not owed. The CREZII has been very judicial and forward thinking how they help all communities in the county, and I hope they continue that way," he says of the future.

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Marriage Licenses

The Morrow County Clerk's office has released the following report of marriage licenses:

December 3, 2020:

- Esai Trinidad Alvarez, 22, Boardman, and Esther Isolina Cruz Casana, 21, Boardman.

- Jessica Garcia Quezada, 27, Irrigon, and Omar Muniz Navarrete, 32, Irrigon.

- Lucila Moreno Gomez, 33, Irrigon, and Flo-

rentino Pena Ramos, 31, Boardman.

December 31, 2020: - Lorenzo P. Cardenas, Jr, 37, Irrigon, and Bertha Alicia Cardenas, 39, Irrigon.

Church window broken



A window was broken at Hopeful Saints Ministry on Gale Street in Heppner between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. on January 3-4. Anyone with information is asked to call the Morrow County Sheriff's Office at 541-676-5317.

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