the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

50¢

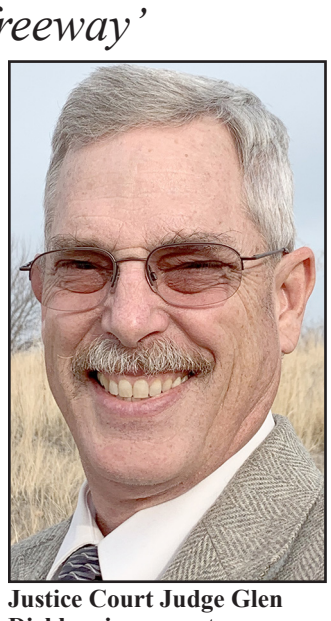
VOL. 140 NO. 3 8 Pages Wednesday, January 20, 2021 Morrow County, Heppner, Oregon

Pandemic and Justice Court

Judge sees faster speeding tickets: 'Not uncommon to get 110 up to 124 mph on the freeway'

By David Sykes

Justice Court Judge Glen Diehl says since the COVID-19 pandemic his court is seeing an increase in school truancy and also higher speeding tickets on the I-84 freeway through north Morrow County. "The court is dealing with effects of the pandemic. We have seen a drastic increase in truancy as well as speeding violations," he said in a report to the county commission at their January 13 meeting. "It's not uncommon to get 110 up to 124 miles per hour on the freeway tickets coming in." Diehl attributed the higher speeds and more tickets to a public attitude that the pandemic has changed things. "I think there are people that feel due to COVID the rules don't apply. Unfortunately, the laws of physics do still apply when they get into accidents. So that is what we are trying to prevent," he said of the enforcement of speed limits.



Justice Court Judge Glen Diehl seeing more truancy.

Oregon State Police are seeing faster speeds on the freeway.

Diehl also said just managing the court's business is more difficult and time consuming now with the pandemic. He said the court staff is working to keep social distancing, enforce other rules and still keep people moving through the system. "We used to do what we called "cattle call" where everyone would show up at 9 a.m. in the morning and sit in the back of the courtroom and then we would call each case one at a time," he explained. "That speeds things up for the court but we can't do that with COVID," he said. Diehl said the people are now required to wait outside and then they bring them in one case at a time to minimize contact with staff and the public. He did point out they did install a number dispenser where people take a number, then wait outside until there case is called. A display is placed in the court window so people can wait in their car and then come in when they see their number come up. 'We shaved off quite a bit of time from the process doing this," he said, calling it "thinking outside the box" in the time of the COVID pandemic. We are trying to keep the process moving and still keep everyone in the courtroom, including staff and public, safer," he said.

Other methods being looked at are installing new equipment and infrastructure to do more "virtual" court such as using the Zoom or Webex conferencing software. Diehl said he plans on sitting down with the county information technology (IT) person and County Administrator Darrell Green to talk about "what we are going to do in the future." The new county offices opening next year will include a new courtroom with the opportunity to install new electronic features to the court.

As part of his report to the commissioners Diehl presented financial reports that showed the court took in $129,031 in fines the last three months of 2020. Of that total, after court and other expenses, the county received $86,401 and the State of Oregon $40,763.

Diehl was asked how collections on unpaid fines was proceeding. Commissioner Jim Doherty said at one point there was $1.5 million in uncollected fines. Diehl said fines are turned over to a collection agency which has been doing relatively well collecting unpaid fines. He did say once a person moves out of the area the county is not able to collect the fines. "We have quite a bit that goes clear back to the 70s and the 80s."

Diehl also pointed out that the state legislature last year took away the ability to suspend a person's license for unpaid fines. "We lost one our biggest motivators for collecting when we no longer have ability to suspend the driver's license or threaten to suspend the license for failure to pay fines," he told the commissioners. "Threatening was a great motivator but at the last special session (state legislature) they took that away from us so we lost a huge incentive for people to keep up with their fines because we can no longer suspend their driver's license for it." The legislature passed the bill with proponents saying suspending licenses for nonpayment of fines disproportionately affected minorities. According to state police statistics Black and Native American drivers receive 26 percent of all driving while suspended charges in Oregon, even though they make up a combined four percent of the population. Lawmakers said that disparity creates a significant disadvantage for people of color who are disproportionately stopped and cited by law enforcement. If a driver is unable to pay a fine, a judge can suspend their license, setting off a compounding cycle of debt that could ensnare a driver for decades, proponents of the law said when it was proposed and passed in Salem last year.

In other business at the January 13 meeting the commissioners made appointments to various committees and boards, including the Columbia River Enterprise Zone number two, CREZII. Although the CREZII has expired that board will still be making decisions spending millions of dollars in tax income per year for the next 15 years. The CREZII board is made up of two representatives each from the City of Boardman, Port of Morrow and Morrow County. Those individuals will decide how the money will be spent. The commissioners voted unanimously to appoint Commissioner Doherty to a two-year term on the CREZII board. He replaces Commissioner Melissa Lindsay whose term has expired. Commissioner Don Russell also is on the board and his term expires end of this year.

The commissioners put off appointing members to the new CREZIII board which is in the process of now being formed. The Port of Morrow and the county are in the final stages of negotiating the rules, or Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA), which will decide how the new enterprise zone operates, so commissioners wanted to wait until a final agreement before making the appointment.

In other business the county appointed Russell Ellsworth of Lexington as an alternate to the Airport Committee Economic Development position. "With Russ' experience in operational finance I feel he would be an excellent pick for the airport committee," Public Works Management Assistant Sandi Pointer told the commissioners. Ellsworth has a BS in construction management from BYU, a master's degree in finance from Harvard and in addition to his job as director of operational finance for a food processor, he also manages a real estate investment fund.

The commissioners also reappointed three members to the county road committee. Representing the Heppner area is Cam Sweeney, Irrigon is Gregory Barron and north county at large is Aaron Palmquist.

In other business the county acknowledged the retirement, after 20 years of county service, of Buz Wainwright from the Public Works Department. Wainwright is senior mechanic who started in September of 2000 as a heavy equipment mechanic at public works. He is "knowledgeable, trustworthy and an expert in his job, and "he shows good judgement and has a lot of common sense," Commissioner Russell said. "On behalf of myself and (Public Works Director) Matt Scrivner I would like to thank Buz for his years of service in the road department for keeping out fleets in safe working order day in and day out. He has good work ethic and dedication," said Assistant Road Master Eric Imes. "He has cattle now to take care of and has built a new shop," Russell said of Wainwright's retirement. "But now he can walk to work and has a wood stove to keep him warm." The crew treated him to donuts and refreshments on his last day of work at the shop last Thursday.

In other business the county officially appointed Matt Kenny as the county surveyor. He will take the place of what has always been an elected position. The commission opted to turn the position into a hired staff position last year so Kenny was appointed and took over this year. "This is our first time to appoint a surveyor in the history of Morrow County," Russell said. "When interviewing him I said this is the right guy for the job." Russell also commended Stephen Haddock the prior elected surveyor as having done a "yeoman's job."

Morrow County disburses $601,778 in coronavirus relief grants

Morrow County has completed disbursing $601,778 CARES, (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) grants. The money went to 49 different small businesses in Morrow County that suffered economic hardship from the COVID-19 pandemic regulations.

The funding was available to all small businesses with less than 25 employees that demonstrated they were prohibited from operations because of government regulations, or they had a one-month decline in sales of 25 percent or more, caused by COVID-19 pandemic regulations between March 1, 2020 and November 30, 2020, as compared to the same time period in 2019.

Below is a list of the businesses that received the money:

Business Name	Amount
O'Doherty Cattle Co.	$ 9,896
Seco Pallets	$ 9,896
Blue Mountain Manufacturing, Inc.	$ 9,896
Xocolatl Bakery	$ 14,493
Dancing Bees Acres, LLC	$ 14,493
Marcie's Nutrition Center, LLC	$ 14,493
Columbia River and Gifts	$ 14,493
Sage Clothing Company, LLC	$ 14,493
Bear Paw Partners	$ 9,896
Heppner Auto Parts	$ 9,896
Neighborhood Center of South Morrow County	$ 14,493
Ione Market & Deli, Inc	$ 9,896
Black Acre Farm, LLC	$ 9,896
Sykes Real Estate	$ 9,896
Don Martin	$ 14,493
Kaley Patterson, LMT	$ 14,493
Danielle Hoeft, LMT	$ 14,493
Timberland Press	$ 9,896
Xtreme Housekeeping	$ 9,896
Boardman Senior Center, Inc	$ 9,896
Treo Ranches, Inc	$ 14,493
O'Doherty Outfitters	$ 14,493
Heppner Community Foundation	$ 14,493
Village Restaurant 2	$ 24,146
Smiley's Happy Place	$ 24,146
Route 74 Restaurant and Lounge	$ 24,146
Gateway Café/Happy Pappy Catering	$ 24,146
Perk and Brews	$ 19,547
Bucknums	$ 24,146
The Sunrise at Boardman	$ 24,146
Sergios	$ 24,146
Marcie's Consulting Service,LLC	$ 14,493
Torito Party Rentals	$ 14,493
Penas Boutique	$ 14,493
La Guadalupana	$ 14,493
Hair Expressions - Kellie	$ 14,493
Hair Expressions - Amber	$ 14,493
Hair Expressions	$ 14,493
Sweeney Mortuary	$ 14,493
Head to Toe Salon	$ 14,493
Commercial Truck Mobile Repair Service, LLC	$ 9,896
	$ 611,672

Buz Wainwright retires after 20 years at Public Works.

I WANT YOUR STORY!

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Is there something you feel needs to be shared with the community?
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