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Administrator set to wrap up 37-year career in health care

Bob Houser retiring this week



Morrow County Health District Administrator Bob Houser plans to trade in his desk soon for a golf cart. -Photo by David Sykes.

By David Sykes

With a 37-year career in health care now behind him, administrator Bob Houser is leaving his office behind and plans to spend more time on the links. "I love to golf and I'm going to spend a lot of time playing golf," Houser says of his retirement plans. That and catching up on all the "honey dos" he has put off over the years.

Houser's last day will be this Thursday wrapping up a five-year stint as the Morrow County Health District Administrator, a job he says has been both professionally and personally gratifying. "I'm really proud of what we accomplished here," Houser says, giving credit to both the staff and district board for his work at the district. He especially points to the completion and doubling of the size of the Irrigon Medical Clinic as a major achievement under his tenure with the district, which covers all of Morrow County. "That was desperately needed," he says of the Irrigon facility.

Houser also points to the preparation work done for an updating of the Heppner hospital building and the planned new clinic facility. "We now have seven to eight clinic exam rooms and under the plans for the new clinic there will be 14 to 15 exams rooms plus extra space for a visiting specialist," he explains. Also, all the providers will have their own offices in the new building, which had been put on hold because of the COVID pandemic.

Since the health district

is county-wide Houser is pleased with his efforts made the past five years to improve the communication and interaction with the "North End" of the county, a term he doesn't particularly like. "It's one county; let's all get along and we can do a much better job," he says. "Our communication with Columbia River Health (the health facility in Boardman) has improved 110 percent," he says of the changes. "We talk every other week if not weekly and I have attended the chamber meetings in Boardman and Irrigon," he says of his work to improve relations, which in the past have been rocky. The district now has, in addition to the Irrigon clinic with its four physician assistants and frequent visits from Heppner doctors, a district-owned physical therapy and home health department located in Boardman. "We have a presence and I think that is only going to get better as time progresses," Houser says.

Although he has had a long career in the medical field, Houser didn't start out there. "I didn't start out to be a CEO in health care. I graduated from college with a degree in secondary education and taught speech and health for seven years in North Platt, Nebraska. He also loves sports and coached basketball and track there. "It wasn't until later that health care excited me," he explains. "I had a very good friend who was in the business and looking for an assistant administrator in 1984," he says after taking

the job as administrator for a very small rural hospital in Preston, South Dakota where he ran a 65-bed nursing home. Houser says back then a person could get into hospital administration by being mentored by a professional. He did go on to take classes and get his master's degree in health care. From a five-year stint at the nursing home, Houser went on to take a job at Regional Health Care Center in Winner, South Dakota where he stayed for 10 years. While there he was part of an upgrade that saw a new 65-bed nursing home built onto a fully remodeled hospital.

While in South Dakota, Houser went to visit his older brother, who was living in Spokane, and fell in love with the Pacific Northwest. His visits prompted him to apply for an opening at the John Day hospital where he was accepted and spent the next 15 years before retiring in 2014.

While at John Day Houser recruited Dr. Russ Nichols out of residency for a position there. Nichols was later hired as a physician in the Morrow County Health District and is the one who then called Houser out of retirement to take an interim position with the Morrow County Health District. "I said I could do a three-month interim then came to meet with the board and by the time the meeting ended I had signed a five-year contract," he says of his path to Morrow County.

Houser and his wife Denise have three children and two of them are also in the health care field. His

twins, Rayce and Rayne, both attended graduate school at Pacific University and will soon be graduating Suma Cum Laude with a doctorate in physical therapy. They are wrapping up their clinical visits in preparing for entering practice soon. He also has three girls and six grandchildren from a previous marriage. He and Denise also have a son Tristan, who like his dad, has a love of sports and coaching, and helped with the Mustang football, basketball and baseball programs. "The boys and the coaches here treated him great," Houser says. He recalls enjoying a healthy rivalry with the Mustangs when his children played for Grant Union high school in John Day. "My son and daughter were competing at John Day against Heppner. Both sides of the fan base did hold grudges," he says good heartedly, "And I have nothing but respect for the Heppner Mustangs, Greg Grant and everyone who runs their program," he says.

Houser says the future of the health district looks good and he praises the staff which Morrow County should be very proud of. "They are very compassionate and caring and professional. It has been my honor to be associated with this district and this hospital over the last five and a half years," he says.

MCHD hires Ryan Fowler as interim administrator



New MCHD administrator Ryan Fowler

The Morrow County Health District Board Monday night signed a six-month interim contract with Ryan Fowler as the new district administrator to take over for Bob Houser who is slated to retire this Thursday. Board member Carri Grieb said that the position had been advertised as an "interim position."

Fowler, 42, was previously CEO at the Lower Umpqua Hospital in Reedsport. Fowler said he was "super excited" about working for MCHD. "I really appreciate this opportunity," he said. Fowler and his wife have two children, eight and 14, still at home, two 18-year-olds and a 21-year-old.

Fowler is originally from the Pocatello, Idaho, area. He said that plans are to have his family stay in Reedsport through the end of the school year so that his 14-year-old can finish out his school year there.

Houser had earlier given notice of retirement but agreed to stay longer with the hope that a new administrator would be hired by that time.



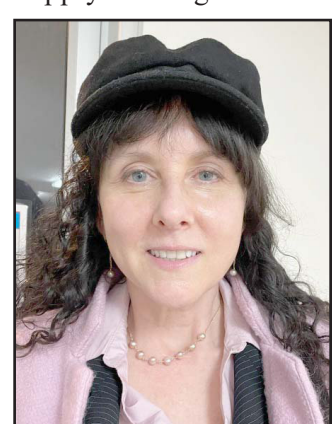
Kris Jones

In other staff changes, former primary care clinic services manager, Kris Jones has been hired as chief operating officer and Suzanne Hurt, previously a journalist with several newspapers, was hired as communications director for the district.

Concerning COVID-19 vaccines, Houser reported that 145 MCHD frontline health care workers had been vaccinated with the first dose for COVID-19, and 200 of the second doses had been received January 19. The second doses were to have been administered to health care workers on January 21 in Heppner and January 22 in Irrigon and Boardman.

Chief Nursing Officer Jamie Houck, BSN RN-CNO, reported that MCHD "has vaccinated 75 staff members, volunteers, non-skilled swing patients and residents at Willow Creek Terrace with their first dose of the Moderna vaccine." Health care workers were to have received their second dose January 21 and January 28 in Heppner, January 27 in Irrigon, and February 1 at Willow Creek Terrace.

Houck said that personal protective equipment "continues to hold steady and we do not have any supply shortages at this



Suzanne Hurt

time" adding, "MCHD has ample amounts of testing supplies at this time." She said that "all staff members, patients and visitors are screened to temperature and COVID-19 symptoms prior to entering any location."

Houser reported that Dr. Jim Hejmanowski has resigned effective Jan. 22 for family reasons and noted that the district has

-See NEW MCHD ADMINISTRATOR/PAGE FOUR

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