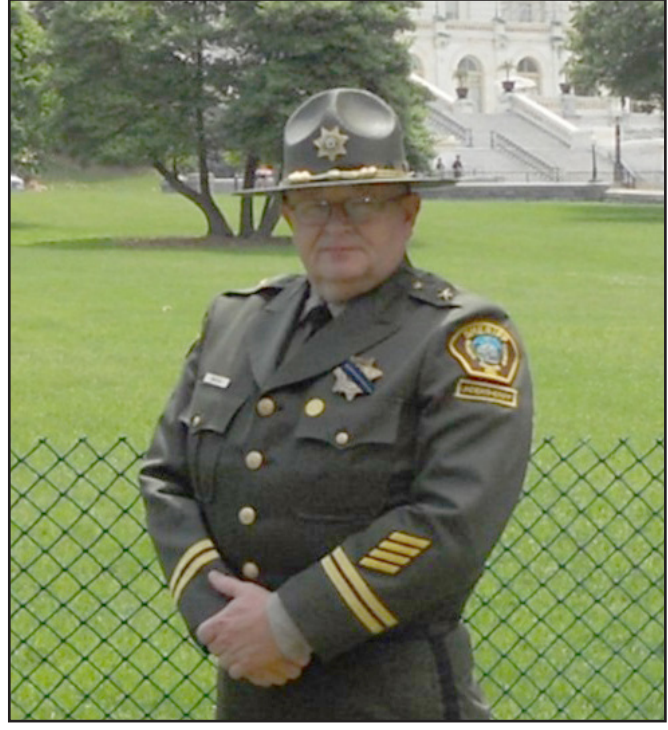




the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

County declares Steve Myren Day



Steve Myren

In honor of Steve Myren, who recently passed away, Morrow County Commissioners passed a resolution declaring February 4, 2021 as Steve Myren Day. The resolution was signed by commissioners Jim Doherty, Don Russell and Melissa Lindsay.

The resolution addressed Myren's accomplishments during his life which included being a Morrow County Sheriff

Deputy, D.A.R.E. teacher, Morrow County Emergency Manager, FEMA Emergency Operations Section Chief for the Incident Response Coordination Team with the US Dept. of Health and Human Services and providing emergency operations at the World Trade Center during the September 11 terrorist attack and worldwide emergencies for earthquakes and hurricanes.

Boardman where he recently opened a pharmacy. He also owns a pharmacy in Condon. "Conflict is good. Competition is good," said Kindle. Murray said he did not have a problem with competition, he just wanted a level playing field and see it required that a new store offer the same perishable products as the existing grocery store.

John Sargent attended the meeting by Zoom and asked why Heppner is not having any economic growth. "I lived in Heppner a long time. What are we doing for economic growth? It's been 20 years since Heppner lost the mill and I have seen nothing," he said. He said Heppner has lost 350 people over the past 10 years and many people now drive to Hermiston to do their grocery shopping. "Heppner is already hurting from that. What are you doing to change?" he asked. Sargent's questions opened a wider discussion at the meeting about Heppner's economic future.

Murray said work is now being done at the former mill site to get the property out of the flood plain and make it available and buildable for new businesses to locate there. "We are working on the Kinzua mill site to get development there," he said. Murray added that the Port of Morrow, for which he is a board member, is putting in a \$100,000 water system at the industrial park and is also trying to get rid of the old co-gen plant located there. The Port is the owner of the site. He also pointed out the county planning commission is

working on establishing new small 10 acre building sites that would allow people to build on the "scab" hillsides around Heppner. Murray was optimistic for Heppner's future, saying, "I'd say we are doing a heck of a lot for economic development in south Morrow County," adding that he would not like to see Heppner remove a basic service like a grocery store by allowing a Dollar General to come in and put it out of business. Murray said he thinks Heppner is on the cusp of some good things happening and its future looks bright. "Let's not ruin it by allowing this dollar box store to come here," he urged the council.

The options for actually stopping the store seem limited however, as the store will be locating in a commercial zone under an allowed use, which means there shouldn't be any need for the city to grant either a variance or conditional use. Heppner also does not have business license requirements and does not regulate what businesses operate within the city limits. Any building licenses sought by the store would be obtained not at Heppner City Hall but from the building inspector's office in Boardman.

Murray did hand out a sample ordinance from the city of Mesquite, Texas he says if adopted may be able to stop the store by forcing Dollar General to carry perishable items. Carrying low margin perishables is not part of Dollar General's business plan and could, opponents hope, make the company abandon plans to locate here.

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Council hears Dollar General arguments

Let's get the discussion started," urges opponent John Murray

By David Sykes

If a Dollar General Store is allowed to locate in Heppner it could drive the local grocery store out of business and create a "food desert" that would lower the livability and health standards of Heppner, local businessman and pharmacist John Murray told the Heppner city council Monday.



Nationwide discount chain Dollar General is looking to establish a store in Heppner and is currently negotiating to purchase the Cornerstone Gallery and RV Park property on Main Street. -Photo by David Sykes.



Heppner businessman John Murray (right) makes his case to city council on why Dollar General should not be allowed to locate in Heppner. Left to right are councilmembers JoAnna Lamb and Dave Gunderson, City Manager Kraig Cutsforth and City Clerk Tarina Foster. Above them is the large TV screen with the Zoom meeting projected. Thirty-nine people attended the meeting by Zoom.

In making his case against the store Murray, who along with his wife Ann own the local pharmacy, said the company has a reputation for poor employment and business practices, including \$56 million in fines, and for selling outdated and defective merchandise with excessive amounts of toxic chemicals. He handed out media and other reports to the council to back up his claims.

Murray's attendance at the council meeting was prompted by Dollar General's earlier announcement it is considering purchasing a lot on Main Street and building a new store. A final decision is expected by the company sometime this year, but Murray and several other businesses and individuals are being proactive to block the store. The lot they are looking at currently has an RV park and the Cornerstone Gallery store owned by local businessman Alvin Liu. Liu says he is currently in negotiations with Dollar General for the sale, but it has not been closed yet.

Opposition to the store was mounted first by local businesspeople Drew and Tayllor Brannon, owners of Breaking Grounds Coffee Shop and Breaking Bread distributorship in Heppner. Other businesses and individuals have joined the effort, and the Brannons urged people to attend Monday's council meeting to let their opposition be known. Murray was the main opposition spokesperson at Monday's monthly

city council meeting.

Murray says the purpose of his coming to the city council was to start a discussion now on whether the store is good for Heppner and should be allowed here. Dollar General has 16,278 stores in 46 states across the country, including 57 locations in Oregon. Because of COVID restrictions, a limited number of people were inside city hall for the meeting, however 39 people attended the meeting by Zoom.

In addition to the poor working conditions and standard merchandise he says the company offers, Murray said the biggest reason he doesn't want the store here is a fear it will skim off the profits from the existing Heppner Family Foods grocery store causing it to close, leaving the town without a place to buy fresh fruits, vegetables and meats. Murray says a store like Dollar General only sells food items "from the middle of the grocery store" meaning processed and packaged foods, which are the highest profit. He said the Dollar stores do not carry the perishable and less profitable foods sold around the edges of grocery stores that are healthier and more nutritious. When this happens, Murrays says in other communities the grocery store closes down creating what he called a "food desert" with no nutritious foods available.

A representative from the local grocery store did not speak at the council

meeting and has publicly joined a group of businesses that have come out against Dollar General, but Murray said even if the local grocery store does "weather the storm" and survive the competition of a new Dollar General, "Why should we take a chance?" he told the council. Murray said he is not against fair competition, but he urged the council to consider an ordinance that would require any Dollar type store locating here to be required to offer fresh foods. Although looking at their businesses model he admitted that stipulation would probably preclude them from locating here. "Why should the leadership of this city in this room take a chance that their business practices are good enough to withstand a \$27 billion business?" I don't think we should. I don't want to have anything that dangerous to the one grocery store that covers 500 square miles," he said about the local Family Foods Store.

Murray made a case to the council against the store, urging the start of a discussion including passing out packets of information to councilmembers detailing the Dollar General's poor business practices and a sample ordinance from a Texas city that might be used to stop them. However, some thought Heppner needs new businesses in town and that many people are leaving town to shop for many of the items the store would offer. "They are bringing in six to 10

jobs. Where are we going to find six to 10 new jobs in Heppner?" Mayor Jim Kindle asked. Murray said the Dollar General would only take employees from other stores and not add to the employment base in Heppner. "If their wages are so horrible, why would an employee go there when they can go to your business and make more money?" Kindle asked Murray. Murray said he did not have an answer to that. Maybe with us having people here that don't work because they can sit here and collect welfare and not have to drive more than 45 miles to work, so they choose not to work. Maybe bringing in more jobs will force these guys to get a job where they don't collect benefits," Kindle said of the economic opportunity he thought the new store would offer.

Kindle also brought up the subject of competition, saying what if, for instance, someone wanted to open a coffee shop, tire store or another pharmacy in town, all of which are already located here, would that be allowed? Murray said he did not have a problem with competition and would "go head-to-head" if another pharmacy were to open in Heppner and does have competition in

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