

County vote sends Amazon money to BMCC

Reverses earlier decision to stop the \$627,517 payment

By David Sykes

The Morrow County Commissioners voted to change direction again last week, this time voting to send \$627,517 funding on to Blue Mountain Community College. The decision was the third time the commission had voted on the funding, and the second time it had reversed its decision on whether BMCC should get the dollars. The money was part of a larger \$11.5 million "gift" payment received earlier from Amazon, Inc, the county's largest taxpayer.

A history of the decisions, changes and reversals about the funding began in March of this year when the county was informed it would receive the \$11.5 windfall payment from Amazon. It was discovered that the company had incorrectly underpaid its property taxes for several years and had then decided to pay the county for the uncollected taxes anyway, even though it did not have to. The payment was classified as a gift, not a tax, which gave commissioners wide latitude on how to spend it. Amazon operates numerous data centers in the Boardman area and is by far the largest taxpayer in the county.

After much debate by the commissioners a plan was developed and passed unanimously to disburse the large bonanza across all taxing districts in the county. Commissioner Melissa Lindsay, even though at that time voted in favor, said she didn't like the action because the county should not be sending the Amazon money to entities like BMCC located outside the county. "I love BMCC. I love the work they are doing, and I know their budget is in trouble," Lindsay said then. "However, I don't want to see six hundred thousand dollars going to Pendleton via BMCC." (The college's general fund would have gotten approximately \$468 thousand and its bond payment another \$159 thousand.) "I think this was for a county-wide disbursement," Lindsay said of her earlier understanding of how the county would pay out the Amazon funds. "My goal is to eliminate those that are not local," adding BMCC was not where she intended the money to go.

Even with her misgivings, however, Lindsay, along with the other two commissioners, voted in favor of the disbursement and county financial officials began making plans to disburse the funds to the college. The check was almost cut when, at an April 20 commission meeting, Lindsay again brought up the \$627,517 payment, this time saying since the March 23 vote to approve the funding, she had heard that BMCC might be scaling

back its work force training program in Morrow County. This concerned her and she began pushing other commissioners to vote in favor of stopping payment to the college.

"Over the last week I heard some news BMCC has transitioned somewhat away from work force development (in Morrow County). I understand they have budget issues," she told the other commissioners. "But I grew ever more uncomfortable and want to again talk about those dollars. I would like to see us hold on to the BMCC dollars," she said in requesting the stoppage. Lindsay said she had talked to BMCC officials who apparently told her the money would be spent in Morrow County, but she wasn't convinced.

Lindsay told commissioners she also had talked to workforce development officials at the Port of Morrow and was told they were putting together a meeting between the Port, county, BMCC and some industry people to "see where this is headed. I would like to see us hold on to those Blue Mountain dollars until we know where Blue Mountain is headed in Morrow County," Lindsay told commissioners in asking them to back the payment stoppage. She said she also wanted to talk about how BMCC intended to spend the money in the county.

Lindsay subsequently convinced fellow Commissioner Jim Doherty to go along with her in blocking the funds, and this time the vote was 2-1 with Commissioner Don Russell being out-voted to stick with the original plan and send the money to BMCC.

Russell explained his vote, saying withholding the funds was "over-reach" by the county. "I think its over-reach on our part. Had not the state of Oregon errored, BMCC would have gotten more than we allocated to them because they are a taxing district in the tax code area," he said of the Amazon payment. Russell said the college "has a board of directors elected by the public to oversee their budget. They decide where to spend those dollars and where they think it benefits the most people. Now it is three county commissioners to weigh in and say we don't like how your elected officials are running your budget, so we are going to withhold tax dollars that probably were rightfully yours. I think it's wrong and over-reach on our part," Russell said.

After stopping the funding, Lindsay said she subsequently met over coffee with BMCC president Mark Browning for a "really great conversation" about what BMCC's plans are for Morrow County. She also said the bigger

meeting that was held May 23 between the college, industry representatives and the port was also productive in discussing "what was working and what was not" in BMCC's workforce training in the county.

Lindsay said the whole on-again-off-again money transfer she initiated between the county and BMCC "wasn't intended to control the college's budget" or "tell them what to do. I knew very little; I just knew there were conversations not happening" and "that slow walking of these dollars was crucial to having the opportunity" to have discussions with BMCC about its future in work force training in the county, she explained.

BMCC president Mark Browning, who attended last week's commission meeting, echoed that the larger meeting between industry, the college and the county was very beneficial.



"We had the right people at the table and everybody kind of laid down their agendas," Browning said. "I think it was very productive and one of the best I've had in the year that I have been here," said Browning, who is new to the job as the college president. Browning added that BMCC does have a future providing work force training in the county. "There is an opportunity to move things forward here for Morrow County and the industries that serve Morrow County," he told commissioners.

Doherty said he was moved to change his mind and vote in favor of sending the money after receiving a call from a former influential instructor he had while attending BMCC. "Paul Davis called and left me a message. 'I understand you suspended those dollars,'" Doherty related Davis told him, "And I know how special Blue Mountain is to you and the time we had there. I want to let you know that at the end of the day you are going to do this, and you are going to do the right thing," Doherty recalled of his former instructor's message to him.

Long-time college supporter and BMCC board member Chris Brown of Morrow County was also at last week's commission meeting and said he is committed to keeping the seven-year-old BMCC work force training center going in Morrow County. He related how he, along with the late county Judge Louis Carlson, began working on opening the center in 2013 and, "I am going to assure that (closing the center) doesn't happen." Brown said there may be changes to the program, but they would be "targeted changes," adding he was "comfortable these funds (Amazon money) would stay in Morrow County." Following the wide-ranging discussion, the commission voted unanimously to send the funds on to BMCC.

Mustangs, Antlers slug it out in first round action

By Blake Carter

Saturday morning the OSAA rolled out its 2022 state championship bracket for the 2A/1A baseball state championships. Back in 2019 the OSAA expanded from its original 16 team bracket, to include 22 teams in the annual baseball and softball state championships. After just one year of the expanded bracket, the pandemic struck and canceled two straight years of the OSAA sanctioned state championships. Now that the sports schedule has returned to normal, so has the bracket. Heppner has faced a year of turbulence, seeing multiple players go down with injuries. After the chaotic season, the Mustangs have finally become as healthy as they can heading into the postseason. The Mustangs were able to finish third in their league, behind the number four overall seed Dufur/South Wasco Rangers, and fifth overall seed Weston McEwen Tigerscots. Unfortunately, Heppner wasn't able to secure a bye into the round of 16 and became one of the 12 teams vying for six spots in the round of 16.

Heppner was placed at 14 in the 2022 state championships and earned the right to host one last baseball game. Their opponent made the long drive from the southern side of Oregon, the Bonanza Antlers came as the second place team from special district six. The 13-7 Antlers didn't come to eastern Oregon to see their season end. This set the stage for a slugfest first round matchup, with the winner living to see one more game. Heppner ended the game in six innings with a 13-3 run rule victory.

Heppner was efficient at the plate, scoring 13 runs on 13 hits. Senior Kason Cimmiyotti led the way at the plate, with 5 RBIs and two home runs. The first round trip came in the first inning, as Cimmiyotti hit a ball all the way to the fence. The Antler defender got the ball back in, but long after Cimmiyotti had rounded third and headed for home. Heppner junior Tucker Ashbeck took the mound in the Mustangs first playoff game, striking out five and allowing no earned runs. Ashbeck started the game off with two scoreless innings and did not allow an Antler batter to get on base.

This allowed the Mustangs to score three more in the bottom of the second inning. Heppner put two runners on with two walks, but also lined out and grounded out, putting two outs on the Mustang offense. After the runners advanced to second and third, Ryan Lindsay added on to the Mustang lead with a two out, RBI single to make it 2-0 Mustangs. Cimmiyotti grabbed two RBIs on a single into right field, 4-0 Heppner. Unfortunately, the Antler catcher would throw the runner out advancing to second, ending the rally.

Ashbeck continued to work on the mound, picking up two strikeouts and a ground out. After seeing all nine batters one time, Ashbeck allowed no baserunners, keeping the Mustang lead solid. The Antler pitcher settled in after a rough start, picking up three quick outs headed into the fourth inning. Bonanza picked up three runs in the fourth inning, capitalizing on a Mustang error. Another error in the field from Heppner allowed Bonanza to steal home, followed by two singles, the game was quickly a 4-3 showdown. The two Mustang errors in the fourth inning would be the only blemish on what was a stellar performance from every Mustang defender. The one run lead wouldn't last through the bottom of the fourth inning, however. Freshman Karver Wilkins stepped up to the plate and hit a leadoff double. Carson Eynetich followed up with a triple of his own, scoring Wilkins and expanding the lead. Ashbeck helped himself at the plate in the very next at bat, scoring a run on a sacrifice fly ball to

center field. Back to back singles and a walk quickly loaded up the bases for the Mustangs. On a ground ball through the left side of the infield, a Mustang runner was caught in front of the Antler defender, causing the Antlers to be unable to make a throw. This caused the runner to be called out, however all of the Mustang runners advanced. After the confusion the Mustangs were up to two outs but had runners on second and third. Cameron Proudfoot would score those two runners on a double, growing the lead to 9-3. Toby Nation would take a single into left field, scoring Proudfoot. A ground out ended the fourth inning, 10-3 Mustangs.

Ashbeck gave up a single to start the fifth inning but forced a fielder's choice to get one out in the next at bat. Ashbeck would pick off the runner at first, and then force another ground out bringing Heppner back up. A quick three outs from Heppner would send the game into the sixth inning. Ashbeck kept the Antlers quiet, once again to start the sixth. In the bottom half of the inning Cimmiyotti hit his second round tripper after Lindsay got on base with a single. Cimmiyotti sent the ball high over the center field fence to cash in his fifth RBI. After a two out single from Nation, a hit by pitch and two walks sealed the game for the Mustangs.

Heppner will make the long trip to the northwest part of Oregon, and Knapapa High School to face the number three overall seed Loggers. The Loggers started 1-3 this season, but after that they won 18 games in a row before losing the season finale.

Over the Tee Cup

The Willow Creek Country Club ladies gathered at 9 a.m. on May 24 for their weekly play. There were 12 players for the second time in two weeks.

Low gross of the field award went to Virginia Grant and low net of the field went to Carol Mitchell. Winners of the least putts of the field were Betty Carter and Lorene Montgomery.

Karen Thompson had low gross for flight A. Carol Mitchell got the longest drive as well as KP for flight A.

Low gross for Flight B was Pat Edmundson and low net was Pat Dougherty. Dougherty also got the longest drive and Edmundson got KP. Shirley Martin had the least putts.

Kris Lindner was the winner of low gross for flight C. Karen Smith-Griffith had the low net and longest drive. Least putts for flight C went to Kim Carlson.

Virginia Grant had a birdie on #9. The Women's Invitational Tournament will be held June 14.

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