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Morrow County, Heppner, Oregon

Dirksen retiring after 41 years

By Bobbi Gordon

Morrow County School District superintendent, Dirk Dirksen, will be retiring from the district after a career spanning 41 years. His last day will be June 30. A retirement party is scheduled to honor Dirksen Thursday, June 16 at the Port of Morrow.

Dirksen, 64, spent 15 years with the district as a teacher at Columbia Middle School and Riverside High School. He was also the district.

zette that he and his wife, Their daughter, Elizabeth, so many outstanding people Rose, have no set plans for lives in Boardman with in Heppner, Irrigon and retirement right now. They her husband, Germain, and Boardman," Dirksen noted. students in Morrow County and "puttering around" Eli and Theo. on their 10 acre property



assistant principal at Riv- for 42 years and have two erside for seven years and children, three grandchilprincipal for eight. The dren and another on the will have more time. past 11 years he has spent way. Their son, Shawn,

plans of leaving the area. He ing up on a dairy farm. He that make the opportunities continued. and Rose have been married graduated high school in real. The community part-

Vale, then went on to college and graduate school in LaGrande at Eastern Oregon State College. He has spent his life living in Vale, LaGrande and Morrow County.

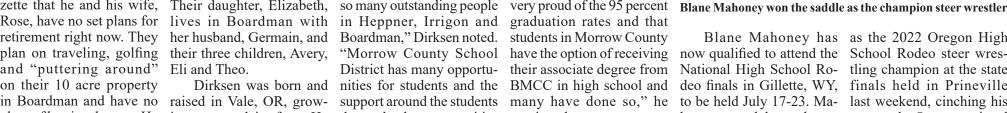
He said it is difficult to leave his position as it is "what he has always done," but he is ready for the next step in the journey. When asked what he will miss, he said, "I will miss the camaraderie the most with staff and students." He plans to get back to helping out with youth sports now that he

"I have really enjoyed as the superintendent for lives in Gresham with his my time working in Morwife, Grace, and they are row County and I appreci-Dirksen told the Ga- expecting a baby any day. ate the opportunity to meet



Mr. Dirksen when he was a math teacher at Riverside (1984-85)

ners in Morrow County are second to none. Combining their efforts and the efforts of teachers and parents, students have a great leg up in their journey. I am very proud of the 95 percent graduation rates and that District has many opportu- their associate degree from



Mahoney heading to

national finals

County declares state of emergency for nitrate tainted drinking water

Doherty meets with 37 state agencies, says situation 'pretty harrowing'

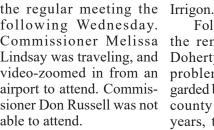
By David Sykes

In a special meeting last week, county commissionaround the Boardman and Irrigon areas. The emergency declaration will allow the county to access money the DEQ fine and is also were in attendance. and resources from the state building the first of three vices to those affected by the contamination.

Commissioner Jim Doherty was the driving force behind the emergency declaration, and as chairman, scheduled a special

day for the vote. The commission normally meets every Wednesday, but Doherty pushed for the special session saying the contamination is so bad in the rural areas Commissioner Jim Doherty of north county he couldn't wait until

meeting last Thurs-



Nitrogen in north county drinking water is nothing new and has been present for many years, however, in January the Oregon Department of Environmen-

urgency of the problem.

viding to local farms to irrigate their crops. Nitrate is used in fertilizer, and crops such as potatoes and wheat are processed at the port. The processing puts

the fertilizer into the wastewater which then finds its way into the groundwater and then drinking water wells. County officials emphasized the contamination is found only in private wells and not in the treated ies of Boardman and

Following the fine and the renewed awareness, Doherty, who admits the problem has been disregarded by himself and other county leaders for many years, took up the nitrate troubles as his number one issue. He says ethnicity are all Caucasian.

on board (as a commissioner) and I wanted to attack the nitrate challenge," Doherty said at last week's special meeting. "And in the community present health care employee at at this meeting and speak- one point asked, "Who's

tal Quality (DEQ) fined ing with one voice,' and I coming to the table? Who ty Health District Administhe Port of Morrow nearly looked around the meeting \$1.3 million for violating and frankly everyone in the ers voted to declare a state its wastewater permit by meeting looked just like of emergency over nitrate dumping 165 tons more me. I looked at our board, contaminated water found nitrate than allowed over the city council, health disin private drinking wells a three-year period, trig-trict and the port boards all gering new awareness and looked the same frankly," Doherty says pointing out like me, right?" He sug-The port is appealing that no Hispanic people

of Oregon to help provide anaerobic digesters that Doherty convinced other clean water and other ser- will help treat some of commissioner to allocate the nitrate it has been promoney for well water testing and he also personally began going door to door with a Spanish speaking county health care employee, and what he found was disturbing. I went into these areas where 90 percent English is a second language. Hispanic areas, and what we began to find almost immediately was pretty harrowing," Doherty says of his experience one Sunday interviewing people at their homes.

"We had questionnaires water used by the cit- that went along with it. I can tell you it was beyond alarming. I said at one point to a reporter, I did not want to knock on the next door and ask the next question, have you had XYZ challenge (health issues related to drinking nitrates). "I embarked on the notion of what is environmental justice?" Doherty said of may be playing a part in his experience. "These are why the problem has been the folks that make this ignored for so long. Ac- county tick," he says of the cording to Doherty, the Hispanics. "We are going majority of those affected to be a majority minority by the contaminated water county and certainly in are Hispanic, but those that area (of contaminated dealing with the problem wells) they make up 75-80 percent of the folks. Some-"Five years ago, I came body has to step out and do the work for them. We can't let them go through the devastation they are going through," Doherty said in urging for action on during discussions I heard the problem, including enpeople saying, 'It is so acting the emergency declawonderful to have everyone ration. He said his Hispanic

is coming to help us?"

Doherty said even the groups at last week's special commission meeting did not include any Hispanics. "Everyone who is in here today looks very much gested the county should maybe start talking about an for some of these things."

Meeting with 37 state agencies

Doherty said prior to last Thursday's special meeting, he and county emergency manager Paul Gray had met in a conference call with 37 different state agencies to talk about the nitrate problem, and they had all urged action. "The state started coming to us and saying you need some help; why haven't you brought in your office of emergency management?" Doherty relates. He said his contact with the affected people shows there is a "complete lack of education or understanding out there. A lot of these folks, probably one third of them, out of the 68-70 of the wells we tested, were high enough (in nitrate concentration) to cause some pretty severe health issues." Doherty said he talked to Morrow Coun-

trator Emily Roberts who asked him, "Why hasn't this risen to the level of an emergency in this county?"

Doherty said he did not want to get sidelined by placing blame and arguing who did what, just saying while many of the It was also asked if it was people he talked to were even necessary to have the After the DEQ fine "Hispanic advisory council buying drinking water, 20- emergency. 30 "were consuming the water and didn't know why ago I worked with some they shouldn't." Doherty congressional funding bill

said others knew they shouldn't but didn't know why. "Some of them (Hispanics) said they didn't think they could have clean water. Some said this is our fate. We don't get Paul Gray to have clean water," County Doherty related.

However, before Manager the vote was taken to eventually approve the into it. You talk nitrates emergency declaration, an hour-long discussion was held among commissioners, emergency personnel and some citizen who weighed in with comments during the online zoom meeting.

Concerns state will take over

One question that came up was a worry the county would lose control if the state were brought in under the emergency declaration.

honey earned the top honor spot on the Oregon national Blane placed in the top

three in all three rounds of state competition. He won a saddle and a buckle as well as earning more than \$3,000 in high school rodeo academic and athletic college scholarships from the state finals.

Mahoney plans to work on the family ranch this summer and will rodeo and study Ag business at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton this fall.

'A couple of months

to see if we could get some funding for this and that was my first step into this nitrate issue," said county emergency manager Paul Gray. "I did not know much about the nitrate issue until I start-

ed digging deeper

with me, I thought hot dogs and bacon. It does worry me quite a bit," he said while highlighting the advantages to having the emergency declaration to work with.

"For us to get state dollars and state help we have to do a declaration of emergency," he explained. "Some of these wells were at five times the recom-

-See EMERGENCY/PAGE





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