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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 assistant principal at Riverside for seven years and principal for eight. The past 11 years he has spent as the superintendent for the district.

Dirksen told the Gazette that he and his wife, Rose, have no set plans for retirement right now. They plan on traveling, golfing and “puttering around” on their 10 acre property in Boardman and have no plans of leaving the area. He and Rose have been married



Dirk Dirksen

for 42 years and have two children, three grandchildren and another on the way. Their son, Shawn, lives in Gresham with his wife, Grace, and they are expecting a baby any day. Their daughter, Elizabeth, lives in Boardman with her husband, Germain, and their three children, Avery, Eli and Theo.

Dirksen was born and raised in Vale, OR, growing up on a dairy farm. He graduated high school in

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 will have more time.

“I have really enjoyed my time working in Morrow County and I appreciate the opportunity to meet so many outstanding people in Heppner, Irrigon and Boardman,” Dirksen noted. “Morrow County School District has many opportunities for students and the support around the students that make the opportunities real. The community part-



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 students in Morrow County have the option of receiving their associate degree from BMCC in high school and many have done so,” he continued.

Mahoney heading to national finals



Blane Mahoney won the saddle as the champion steer wrestler.

Blane Mahoney has now qualified to attend the National High School Rodeo finals in Gillette, WY, to be held July 17-23. Mahoney earned the top honor

as the 2022 Oregon High School Rodeo steer wrestling champion at the state finals held in Prineville last weekend, cinching his spot on the Oregon national team.

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.

It was also asked if it was even necessary to have the emergency.

“A couple of months ago I worked with some congressional funding bill

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 started digging deeper

into it. You talk nitrates 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 TEN

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 commissioners voted to declare a state of emergency over nitrate contaminated water found in private drinking wells around the Boardman and Irrigon areas. The emergency declaration will allow the county to access money and resources from the state of Oregon to help provide clean water and other services to those affected by the contamination.

Commissioner Jim Doherty was the driving force behind the emergency declaration, and as chairman, scheduled a special meeting last Thursday 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 of north county he couldn't wait until the regular meeting the following Wednesday.

Commissioner Melissa Lindsay was traveling, and video-zoomed in from an airport to attend. Commissioner Don Russell was not able to attend.

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

tal Quality (DEQ) fined the Port of Morrow nearly \$1.3 million for violating its wastewater permit by dumping 165 tons more nitrate than allowed over a three-year period, triggering new awareness and urgency of the problem.

The port is appealing the DEQ fine and is also building the first of three anaerobic digesters that will help treat some of the nitrate it has been providing 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 water used by the cities of Boardman and Irrigon.

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 may be playing a part in why the problem has been ignored for so long. According to Doherty, the majority of those affected by the contaminated water are Hispanic, but those dealing with the problem are all Caucasian.

“Five years ago, I came on board (as a commissioner) and I wanted to attack the nitrate challenge,” Doherty said at last week's special meeting. “And during discussions I heard people saying, ‘It is so wonderful to have everyone in the community present at this meeting and speak-

ing with one voice,’ and I looked around the meeting and frankly everyone in the meeting looked just like me. I looked at our board, the city council, health district and the port boards all looked the same frankly,” Doherty says pointing out that no Hispanic people were in attendance.

After the DEQ fine Doherty convinced other commissioner to allocate money 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 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 his experience. “These are the folks that make this county tick,” he says of the Hispanics. “We are going to be a majority minority county and certainly in that area (of contaminated wells) they make up 75-80 percent of the folks. Somebody 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 the problem, including enacting the emergency declaration. He said his Hispanic health care employee at one point asked, “Who's

coming to the table? Who 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 like me, right?” He suggested the county should maybe start talking about an “Hispanic advisory council 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-

ty Health District Administrator 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 people he talked to were buying drinking water, 20-30 “were consuming the water and didn't know why they shouldn't.” Doherty 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 to have clean water,” Doherty related.

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.



Commissioner Jim Doherty



Paul Gray County Emergency Manager

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