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**Heppner**

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# County commission in flux during last meeting of 2022

By Andrea Di Salvo

Outgoing Morrow County Commissioner Don Russell met with commissioners-elect Jeff Wenholz and David Sykes Dec. 28 in Heppner in what he referred to as an "informational" meeting. While Morrow County Clerk Bobbi Childers swore in both Sykes and Wenholz before the meeting, their terms did not officially begin until January 2, making Russell the solitary commissioner at the meeting.

With only one commissioner present at the meeting, the Morrow County Board of Commissioners did not have a quorum, which meant no action could be taken during the meeting. The three men used the time mostly to discuss items that would need to be high on the agenda for the incoming county commissioners.

Before diving into county business, however, the board and other present heard Jeff Bailey present a letter of request on behalf of assisted living facility Willow Creek Terrace. Bailey, who is the secretary/treasurer for the WCT Board of Directors told the audience that the last few years have



Jeff Wenholz, Bobbi Childers, David Sykes at swearing in ceremony

He presented a letter that outlined the problems and proposed steps the facility is taking and that requested any available funding from Morrow County.

"As you know, we can't take any action," said Russell, "but I think it's good that the two commissioner-elects can hear the issue a little bit, at least get primed on it a little bit, before next year starts."

Russell added that it was something the board of commissioners would need to discuss with the finance department and see if there were funds available, and that it would then be up to the two commissioners-elect to decide if it is

forward, and then majority rule. So, if two representatives from one entity, such as the county, don't agree with the rest of the group, it doesn't happen. Russell said that had happened in the past, when he and former commissioner Leann Rea had disagreed with the rest of the CREZ board.

He also told them CREZ III has three voting members from the Port and three from the county. In the past, all three commissioners have been on the board. Since there are only two commissioners at the moment, Russell suggested that they each serve and have Gorman also be a voting member until a third commissioner is appointed.

Russell also asked Wenholz and Sykes their thoughts on a county administrator. Sykes said they want to move forward with hiring a county administrator and appoint one in the interim. He said he had talked with Greg Sweek and could not think of anyone better for the position. Sweek was county assessor for 35 years.

He presented a letter that outlined the problems and proposed steps the facility is taking and that requested any available funding from Morrow County.

County counsel Nelson agreed. "At this meeting, actionable decisions can't be made. Any statements can be made saying, 'Well, we want this to happen.' That doesn't mean it's happening until a vote occurs in a general meeting with a quorum present. That won't be until the fourth," Nelson said.

Nelson also addressed concerns some showed about the legality of the meeting, saying it was his interpretation that a single commissioner, especially when the sole commissioner, could call a public meeting for discussion and input.

"It's still a public meeting. The public is aware of what's happening. That's what I think is the current here. But no official action is taking place," he said.

An earlier comment from an anonymous Zoom participant going by the name "Citizen" had stated that the meeting was illegal under open meeting laws.

"I think it's also important for everyone to know that Morrow County has strived reasonably to be prepared for this situation where there's one commissioner," Nelson added. "We've been in contact with the governor's office, working on trying to say, 'Is there an appointment? Can we get that done ahead of time?'"

He added that the need for a quorum wasn't only for regular meetings, but also in case of the need for an emergency meeting in the county.

"We wish we had a quorum. We wish there was an appointment done," he said. "But we're still continuing on with the government, still doing what we

## Obituaries

### Rena Henry

Rena Henry, 78, of Heppner died Dec. 26, 2022, in Heppner. A celebration of life will be held at a later date.

She was born in New Mexico on February 2, 1944, but she was raised in Oregon, where she met her husband, Roger Henry. She was a ranch wife and a homemaker. Together they raised one child, Roger Jr. Cards or donations maybe sent to Roger Henry, P.O. Box 1046, Heppner, OR 97836.

## Donation account set up for Henry family

Donations are being accepted to help pay for the medical and final expenses of Heppner woman Rena Henry. Rena, 78, passed away Monday, Dec. 26.

The Bank of Eastern Oregon will take all donations it receives and put them in Roger Henry's account. Bank of EO account holders can call the Heppner branch at 541-676-8125 and have funds transferred to directly to Henry's account. Donations and cards may also be sent directly to Roger Henry at PO Box 1046, Heppner, OR 97836.

## Barrel race proceeds to help families of crash victims

A barrel race and silent auction are being planned for Jan. 22 in Heppner, with proceeds to go to the families affected by the fatal car crash that killed three local people outside Lexington last Friday.

Organizer Tiffanie Greenup said the idea started as she was wondering what to do to help the families out.

"The Nelson and Gould families are families that would do anything for anyone without ever being asked; this has been proven time and time again," she said. "So a friend of mine, Gilla Lieuallen from Pendleton, and I were talking, and we decided to do a barrel race."

The event will be at the Wilkinson Indoor Arena at the Morrow County Fairgrounds. The barrel racing will begin at 1 p.m., but there will be time only from 10 a.m. to noon. Participants are asked to be early, as noon will be a sharp cutoff. Open riding will take place from noon until 12:45 p.m.

Entry fee is \$20, which will be jackpotted back. Pay in and payout will be cash. The race will be a 4D half-second split.

The office fee is \$10 each, and time only runs are \$5 each or three for \$10. Riders will receive tickets when they pay their fees.

All time only money and office fees will go to the families.

Daniel Hansen has donated \$1,000 added for the barrel race. A donation jar will also be available, as well as the silent auction. Julie Baker is in charge of the silent auction and hopes to have a list of donated items soon.

Jeannie Collins is planning a meal, most likely soup and rolls, which will be by donation back to the families.

Greenup says the response has been tremendous, but more help and donations are always welcome.

"People are donating from everywhere," she says. "Some don't know the families but may have grown up in South Morrow County, some are part of the barrel racing/rodeo community, and others are just giving for the cause."

"This is why we live in a small community and raise our kids here," she added. "When someone is going through hard times, everyone steps in without ever being asked and makes a difference."

More information will come out as available. Contact Tiffanie Greenup with questions about the barrel race or Julie Baker about the silent auction.

Patrick's Senior Center dining room.

For more information, contact KayRene Qualls at 541-980-2836.

## Heppner Housing Authority to meet

The next meeting of the Heppner Housing Authority for the Heppner senior center will be Tuesday, Jan. 10, at 4 p.m. in the St.



Morrow County Clerk Bobbi Childers swears in commissioner-elect Jeff Wenholz

been difficult for the facility in terms of supplies, staffing and finances.

"It's no surprise to anyone that COVID is taking a big toll on anything related to health care. You guys have been neck deep or higher in that process throughout the last two years. It's really taken a toll on the assisted living facility," he said.

He said the cost of supplies and supply chain issues were a problem, but that staffing has also been a huge issue.

"I think most people are aware of what the labor market's done in the area, in the state, in the nation as far as finding replacement people when people move on."

However, underpinning the other problems was the issue of income. During COVID restrictions, Bailey said, WCT wasn't able to recruit new residents if a unit became vacant for some reason.

"That was sort of a double whammy of the whole situation. Not only were expenses up, but we weren't able to generate the kind of income that we need to really make the facility operate."

Bailey said that going back three or four years, the facility had pretty much broken even financially, and that they viewed it as a service to the community, allowing people to stay closer to home when they get to the point of needing assistance. That trend started to change in 2020, when the assisted living facility lost about \$29,000. In 2021, WCT lost \$93,000.

"Through the third quarter of 2022, we're down \$111,000 on the year," said Bailey. "We're trying to do about anything we can to bridge that gap."

Bailey told the board that WCT had tapped into their operating reserves.

something the county can do.

Wenholz asked if WCT had a specific ask, of if it was just whatever was available. Bailey replied that they could have a specific number if that was something the commissioners needed, but "It really comes down to whatever we can get."

"We keep thinking things are going to stabilize and normalize, but that just doesn't seem to be happening," he added.

In county business, Russell brought up the need to review the status of Morrow County representatives to the Columbia River Enterprise Zone (CREZ) II board. Russell was the current chair, but his term ended Jan. 3. In the past, commissioners have acted as the county's CREZ representatives, but Russell said that doesn't have to be the case.

CREZ II voting members are made up of two representatives of the county, two from the City of Boardman and two from the Port of Morrow. Russell said his recommendation after the two commissioners took office would be to appoint themselves to the two positions and appoint Mike Gorman an alternate. He said the only thing he thought the CREZ II had to do in the near future was disburse roughly \$13 million throughout Morrow County. Last year there was about \$10 million, and he said CREZ II Manager Greg Sweek could get them the information on how that was disbursed.

"It's a terrible problem to have. Revenue's up 30 percent over last year," he quipped.

He also informed the incoming commissioners that it takes a minimum of one positive vote from each entity to pass something



Greg Sweek

"I don't think there's anybody who knows more about Morrow County government, to be honest with you," said Sykes. "He knows everybody. People return his phone calls. He knows how things work around the courthouse. We're going to be needing that. We have two new commissioners moving in with no administrator."

Sykes said he hopes to take action and sign a contract with Sweek at the first



Morrow County Clerk Bobbi Childers swears in commissioner-elect David Sykes

meeting of 2023.

"I think it would be best for the county and best for the functioning of the government," he said.

The contract proposed is one used before when Kim Cutsforth was the interim county administrator. Russell said he supported that but recommended running the proposed contract by Morrow County Human Resources Director Lindsay Grogan and Morrow County Counsel Justin Nelson. Commissioner Russell di-

can, with the understanding still that there's not a quorum, so no official action can be taken."

Nelson also pointed out that other elected officials, department heads and employees were still attending to their jobs every day.

"Even with there being one commissioner, the government still functions."

"I appreciate that," agreed Russell. "I see a lot of senior leadership of Morrow County in this