

New commissioners conduct first meeting of the year

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emergency portion and some of the recovery, but the ongoing recovery will go on for years.

"I'm only dealing with the emergency part, trying to make sure that we can get the state going with some of the stuff that they have promised within their work plan," said Gray.

"It just sounds to me like what you're really asking us is, for you to just do your job," said Sykes.

"Yes," Gray responded.

"That's exactly what I'm asking. Before, I was kind of pushed to the side while the commissioner was running the show. I want to be able to do my job, and I need to be part of the whole aspect of the emergency, and through this I've been kind of pushed to the side. I brought it to commissioner Doherty, brought it to commissioner Lindsay, and I was always told that they would keep me better informed on some things, and it always just kind of fell through."

"I don't want to overstep my bounds, because somebody else was doing some of the work, and I just want to make sure it's okay if jump in and do it. I just don't want to step on anybody's toes," he added.

The commissioners said they saw no problem with that.

"I think you know better than either of us what needs to happen to deal with the state," said Wenholz, saying it was his understanding that emergency was declared in order to get the attention of the state and obtain needed resources, and that had happened. "It's up to you to manage those resources and move forward," he told Gray.

County employee retirement plan

Morrow County Finance Director Kevin Ince and Morrow County Human Resources Director Lindsay Grogan brought forward a proposed amendment that was meant to correct an error from the original drafting of the county employee retirement plan. The plan is administered through Northwest Retirement Solutions.

"They reached out to us and wanted to do a discretionary amendment to the plan because we are administering the plan a different way than the document was actually written," said Grogan.

The amendment states that the plan only recognizes compensation from the time the participant becomes eligible for the compensation that Morrow County makes contributions on and deducts from the employee wages. That is how the plan has been administered but not how it was written in the original document.

Grogan said it affects 12-15 employees. The plan became effective in 2020 with a six-month waiting period. The first participant was not eligible until February of 2021, and they asked that the amendment be backdated to then.

Wenholz questioned the back dating of the resolution, and the commissioners chose to set the issue aside until more of their questions could be answered.

On the subject of the retirement plan, though, Sykes said he remembered when the contribution plan was begun and asked if there was a time the board of commissioners could receive a full update on where the plan was.

"At the time we had a financing hole," he said.

"Just kind of let us know where we're at. Are we gaining any ground on that?"

"Is there something that we as a commission need to plan for, to make sure we're good going into the future?" he added.

"My concern is that the last time I saw it there was something around a \$13 million unfunded obligation," Wenholz added. "So, what level do we need to fund it up to and, going forward, do we need to look at appropriating toward that?"

"It's not simple," said Ince, adding that a work session with the consultants might be in order.

Revision of board chair rotation

In other business, the commissioners looked at possible revision of the current rotating chairmanship of the Morrow County Board of Directors. After the commission eliminated the county judge position several years ago, the commissioners made the chair and vice chair positions rotate yearly by elected positions. Sykes was elected to position #3 which, according to rules set in place, is the board chair for 2023. Wenholz asked to revisit that decision.

"It's been my experience that sometimes a good board member doesn't necessarily make a good board chair," he said. "Also, an aspect of it is that about after a year is the time everybody's getting in a good swing of how everything's working, and then you just start over."

"I'd like to see us move away from that rotation and make it an annual deal that the board will appoint the chairman on an annual basis by a vote of the commissioners," he added.

Before the switch from county court to county commission, the Morrow County Judge was always chair.

The commissioners directed Morrow County Counsel Justin Nelson to prepare a resolution for review at a future board meeting.

Possible change to meeting schedule

The commissioners also discussed a change in the board of commissioners' meeting schedule. A current ordinance dating back to 1981 states that meetings shall take place at 9 a.m. on the first four Wednesdays of each month, three times in Heppner and once in Irrigon.

Wenholz said that typical meetings are no more than three hours, and he thought it would be the most efficient use of time and resources to meet two times a month for longer.

"And if it takes all day to meet, then it takes all day to meet, and we just conduct business on those two days," said Wenholz. He suggested making the change starting in March to give people time to adjust and to allow time for the board to take care of urgent upcoming business such as selection of a third commissioner. "Maybe by that time we'll be in a routine of how things are happening and more comfortable with this." The meetings would rotate between Heppner and Irrigon.

Sykes said he wanted to hear from elected officials and staff concerning what they thought of the change.

"We want to make sure as commissioners that we're having contact with the electeds and the department heads," he said. "We want to hear their visions for what they have for their departments, for the county. We want to be

in contact with them," he added, asking whether that would be accomplished better in weekly or in longer, bi-weekly meetings.

Morrow County Assessor Mike Gorman said his only issue would be concerning citizens who have business with the county, such as a subdivision plat, who might have their plans postponed another week. "Not that we have a lot," he said, "but we have a lot more than we used to."

Wenholz said he thought they could always call a special meeting if something came up.

Ince agreed in general with the idea of fewer meetings.

"Generally speaking, I always support the idea of less frequency," said Ince. "If we as staff and management and directors are allowed to operate within the bounds of policies...if that's the case and we're allowed to move forward in that manner, then maybe the agendas aren't as full of things that don't need to be there," he said, adding that since he started with the county he had seen things come before the board that he didn't think really needed to.

"To that point, I think Dave and I are both on the same page, in that there's where we want to head to," said Wenholz, "to have procedures and policies in place so that staff can do their job. We're up here to provide policy and direction. The administrator deals with the day-to-day operations."

"I think it makes a lot of sense for all the reasons you both have noted," agreed Mabbott, but added that commissioners occasionally have to participate in land-use hearings or appeals, which might add too much time to a bi-monthly meeting. "If those come up, it might make more sense to schedule those on a day other than your twice-monthly regular meeting."

"It sounds from what I'm hearing is that you have the two standard meetings and then if something special comes up, you are more than willing to add another date, so I think you guys are on a really good track," added Morrow County Treasurer Jaylene Papineau. The commissioners directed Nelson to draft an ordinance repealing and replacing the former meeting schedule as per the discussion.

Commissioner appointment

The commissioners also discussed the process required to select and appoint a third Morrow County Commissioner. The commissioner would fill the rest of the term of former commissioner Jim Doherty, who was recalled last year. Morrow County Clerk Bobbi Childers mentioned at an informational meeting previously that she believed candidates for appointment would need to fill out the same paperwork as candidates who filed for the position in an election. Otherwise, Nelson said there was a lot of flexibility in the process; commissioners could either select someone immediately or go through a thorough public selection process.

Wenholz said he would like to post the position in several places, including on the county website and in a couple of newspapers, and would like to hold it open at least three weeks to allow people time to prepare and submit applications. He also suggested having Childers be the person to receive those applications

so she could verify that they filled out the correct forms.

Sykes agreed but emphasized that he wanted the process done correctly so there could be no later accusations of forgetting something.

"I don't want to get tripped up with, 'Oh, we should have done it this way,' and now we're open to a challenge on it," he said. He also added that he wanted all the applications to be held confidential and presented to the board at one time after the deadline.

Since Childers was not present at the meeting, the discussion was held over until the county clerk could participate.

Interim county administrator

The board next discussed hiring an interim county administrator. The temporary position would not be full time, and though paid through county payroll, would not be eligible for benefits.

Nelson said that from the research he had done, approaching it like hiring a temporary employee was the best route. He said he and Grogan had tried to look at how it had been done in the past but not found much paperwork, so had talked about what the best approach would be.

"I think one of the most important things we can do is find an applicant who has prior experience not just in the county but within the county government, so they can hit the ground running," he said. "Even a person who has years of experience as an administrator isn't going to be the person there. It might be the person who knows how *this* county runs. It's kind of a unique position to fill."

Grogan added that she thought the plan should be to post the position for a week and allow applicants to apply.

"Depending on applicants, I could award that pretty quickly," said Grogan.

Sykes called on Greg Sweek, who had already expressed interest in the position.

"Of course, we've had discussions, you know I'm interested in the position. I am curious about past practices," said Sweek, pointing out a couple of instances in the past when he didn't think positions had been advertised before being filled, such as the undersheriff and an employment agreement with Karen Wolff. "When you talk about treating things the same, it seems like past practices, they haven't all been treated the same way."

Grogan responded that the undersheriff was an in-house promotion, while Wolff's position had been advertised. Sweek asked why he, as a county employee, could not be considered for a promotion. Grogan responded that she did not see his position in elections as related to that of county administrator but said that could be considered subjective. Grogan read for the commission the county's best practices for promotion without posting, and Sykes said he though Sweek fit that bill.

"I looked at the last time there was an interim administrator appointed, and I go back and look at the minutes where they made this decision. I assume our predecessors were following the rules at the time," said Wenholz, referring to when Kim Cutsforth was appointed interim county administrator. He said the minutes showed a motion to enter into negotiations with

Cutsforth and then later to enter an agreement, but the minutes showed no discussion of posting the position. "I was just following the precedent that had been laid out by our predecessors."

The board chose unanimously to offer employment to Sweek immediately.

"We want to follow the process," said Wenholz, "but I think it's important that we get somebody into the position sooner rather than later."

In other business, the board of commissioners:

-Appointed Morrow County Finance Director Kevin Ince as Budget Officer for fiscal year 2023-24. The budget officer prepares or supervises the preparation of the budget for the year. It has been the board's practice to reappoint a budget officer every year, a position historically held by the finance director.

-Approved the Fifth Amendment to Morrow County's IGA with Oregon Health Authority and authorized Ince to execute the amendment. The IGA provides for funding for mental health services through Community Counseling Solutions, the mental health contractor for Morrow County. The amendment reduced the allocated budget by \$260,000 because the funds from the OHA grant had not been used.

-Appointed commissioners Jeff Wenholz and David Sykes to the two vacant positions on the Columbia River Enterprise Zone (CREZ) II board with Mike Gorman as an alternate. CREZ II is complete

and is tasked with distributing funds over the next 15 years.

-Appointed the three Morrow County Commissioners to the three vacant CREZ III board positions with Gorman as an alternate. Since Morrow County currently has only two commissioners, Gorman will act in his capacity as an alternate until a third commissioner is appointed.

-Appointed Wenholz to the one vacant position on the Columbia Development Authority (CDA) board with Sykes as alternate.

-Reviewed the board of commissioner committee and board assignments and determined to keep assignments according to commissioner position until a third commissioner is appointed.

-Heard the Morrow County Sheriff's Office monthly report from administrative lieutenant Melissa Camarillo. Juvenile complaints were down for December, but motor vehicle accidents were up, both of which were normal for bad weather, she said.

-Heard an introduction to the district attorney's office from Nelson, who is Morrow County District Attorney as well as Morrow County Counsel. He reported that the new Deputy DA Zach Williams was working hard to get caught up on existing cases.

-Received a written report from the Morrow County Fair. The fair board asked to set up a meeting with commissioners in February to talk about funding received for infrastructure and building improvements.

New face, promotion at sheriff's office



The Morrow County Sheriff's Office had a busy Tuesday last week when it promoted one deputy and swore in another. Top: Morrow County Sheriff John Bowles (left) with Patrol Sergeant Matt Crowell as Crowell is sworn in to his new position. Crowell, who has been with MCSO for eight years, was promoted from criminal deputy to patrol sergeant. Bottom: Bowles swears in a new face, Patrol Deputy Royal. -Photos courtesy of MCSO

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