

Community action group questions county commission

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Local community members gather to express their concerns over the water nitrate issue. - Contributed Photo

She said they have five wells on their property and had tested two of them. One was over the limit, and they had small children in that home. She said they had put in a whole-house filter costing them nearly \$5,000. She said she has asked if any or all of that would be reimbursed and had not received an answer yet.

"I understand that the emergency has not been renewed by this board, and thus I understand the emergency manager's position has changed, and I believe that this is now focused on human health," she said, "and I think our health department and that new position really needs to address the water issue, since that funding was directed toward that position."

She added that it was also her understanding that the free water delivery would stop in February or March. "We're finding out that the filters aren't working. We're nervous," she said. "It seems like it's been nine months since we started asking and we've received nothing, and we want to know that the county is behind us and they will continue the funding for the free water delivery."

Gray responded that he had just had a meeting with the governor's office and the Oregon department of health, and they told him that, though the state contract ends in the spring, they had enough funding to go all the way to the end of the fiscal year. The county would then have to request another year's worth of deliveries, but the state told him they have the funds for that, as well.

"So I have no idea where you're getting the information that water delivery's going to stop," said Gray, "and if there does happen to be a lapse where the state says, 'We can't cover it,' the business coalition has put money into an account that will be used for water deliveries to help the residents." The business coalition is a group of Boardman businesses that has organized to help with water testing and funding.

"We need a strong message from the county," said Doherty. "We need a strong message from the county to go to the state and to our governor and to our representatives."

"I think we're hearing from Paul, and we're going to get that message," said Sykes. "That's in progress."

"Yes," said Gray, adding that the county is working with other organizations including Oregon Health Authority (OHA) and other community-based organizations (CBOs) to get more coverage. "We're looking at trying to get more stuff out. No matter what, we're looking at managing this."

"If the filters haven't been working, I can't give you an answer as to why that's happening," he addressed Doherty. "I just heard as of yesterday from people that talked with your husband, Jim, that said that the filters are now not working. I don't know why that information wasn't passed down to emergency management or to public health. I'm at a loss."

Boardman resident Mike Brant said he was "just a citizen here with a bad well."

"There was supposed to

have been \$200,000 allocated for payment of this fresh water, and that happened, and it was being done," he said, and then asked if the idea that water delivery would stop mid-February was a falsehood.

"That is a falsehood," replied Gray.

Brant said he was told the whole \$200,000 hadn't been used. "Where is the rest of that money?" he asked.

"I don't know what \$200,000 you're talking about," Gray responded, adding that the original request to the board of commissioners, which at that time included Jim Doherty, Melissa Lindsay and Don Russell, was for \$100,000. The county had come close to spending that when Gray returned to the board and requested another \$60,000, which was approved Nov. 2, bringing the total requested to for the nitrate emergency to \$160,000.

"As of the end of last month, we were at \$139,000," Gray added, "So we're coming close to spending all of that money."

"How did this figure of \$200,000 pop up all of a sudden?" asked Brant, "And now you're telling me it never existed."

"We can address rumors," Sykes interjected, "and we want to, because we want to straighten them out, but I think you've heard from him (Gray), and he's told you how much was allocated."

"You folks are the ones doing the bookkeeping on that dollar amount, whichever amount that is, is that correct?" asked Brant.

"It's county money, and we have accounts for everything down at finance showing how much we've spent," replied Gray.

Boardman man Luis Monge expressed concerns over the inclusion of the Hispanic population in the process.

"We have a lot of Spanish people affected with this problem. What is the plan to have a translator, a legal translator, to make us understand what we're doing?" he asked.

Gray responded that one of his projects is to try to get funding from the state to cover translation services and possibly bring in one or two more people to assist in translation for the water emergency. Right now, he said, the county has access to Oregon Dept. of Human Services translators.

"But I do want to see about getting someone local," he added, "which, I thought we were in partnership with Oregon Rural Action, who has been having the meetings with translators."

"What I'm getting from this is, is Oregon Rural Action asking not to be part of this any more?" Gray asked.

"No," replied Sanchez. "These are questions that the community raises because we see the need for consistency, specifically in this meeting, right? We are actively creating a space to make it inclusive for Spanish speakers to participate."

She added that there was no online option to switch to interpretation mode as could be seen in other Zoom spaces posted with other organizations and agencies.

"So you're specifically requesting about Zoom

meetings," said Gray.

"Yes, so that we're able to stay informed on the issues, because sometimes it could be addressed, and it's important that our community has access to that as well," said Sanchez.

Gray responded that he did not have an answer to that at the moment and would have to look into what they could do as far as translating services for Zoom.

Monge also asked what they could do to find a permanent solution to the problem. Gray said county agencies would be working to determine the answer to that question, and that it might not be the same answer for every home. Solutions might range from new septic systems and wells to water treatment centers for some communities.

"There is a path forward," added Sykes. "The money that was allocated by Sen. Merkley is a good start on that."

Another resident, Gary Klinger, said he had been there 16 years and his nitrate levels are in the high 30s.

"I would like to know if all three of you are on board with us and trying to help us here," he said.

"Our role is a part of this solution, not the whole solution, but this is a complex issue," replied Sykes. "It's not simplistic. I think anyone who says it is, they don't know. They haven't delved into it."

"We do care," said Sykes. "We are moving forward."

"And the problem's not just the Port," said Gray, adding that people want to blame the Port of Morrow, but that a look at the numbers showed it was responsible for a fraction of the nitrate problem. "Where is the rest of the contamination coming? If we don't look at where all of this contamination is coming, and we don't fix everything, then we're still going to have this problem decades from now."

"I understand this is not one person's fault. This had been going on for many a year. I'm probably as guilty as anybody," Klinger said, adding that he had farmed more than 8,000 acres of wheat land and had put a lot of chemicals on the ground over the years. "A lot of it comes from the farmers, it comes from a lot of different sources. I realize that."

"Right now, they're still putting nitrates out on the ground, junk, that they shouldn't be doing," he said. "It's not helping the situation, and we need help from you guys to put a stop to that."

"We're going to do the county's part," replied Sykes, "but we're not the only ones involved. There's a lot of different entities involved."

Ana Maria Rodriguez, also an ORA community organizer, approached the board and asked her question in Spanish.

"Do you understand me?" she asked. When told they didn't, she repeated in English, "Do you commissioners get your water from a city, or from a well?"

Morrow County Commissioner Jeff Wenholz, who is from Irrigon, replied that he got his from a well. Sykes, who lives in Heppner, said he gets his from the city.

"But that really has no bearing on how we approach this problem. We're going to approach this problem just as aggressively whether we're on a well or on a city," he told Rodriguez. "That is not the deciding factor."

Rodriguez replied that she had asked the question in Spanish because she was interested to see if the

commissioners could understand her. She pointed to citizens in the back of the room and told the board they did not understand English, and that was why she wanted to bring in a translator.

"So please, next time, if you could bring someone who speaks in both languages, I really appreciate that."

"I agree," put in Gray. "We keep having these meetings every week in just English, and we have multi ethnics in every community throughout this county. We should be more inclusive to everybody."

The commissioners later tasked Morrow County Counsel Justin Nelson with researching that Zoom option. Nelson told the Gazette-Times on Monday that he thought he had worked out a solution and would be conducting a test run with ORA on Tuesday to see if the Zoom translation would



Ana Maria Rodriguez, Community organizer ORA. -Contributed Photo

work for the Jan. 25 board of commissioners meeting.

Debbie Radie, VP of operations at Boardman Foods and part of the business coalition helping with recovery effort, was also present at the meeting via Zoom, and asked to speak when the last ORA speaker had finished. The coalition has reimbursed over \$51,000 of the county's nitrate expenses thus far.

"We are very interested in having safe water for all, and we want to support with funding, and we have already supported the funding for continued education, well testing, and the filters," said Radie. "I've been a well owner in Morrow County for 30 years. It has affected my family, my friends, and it is personal, and we do need to continue to educate."

Radie added that she considered herself an activist in her own right, whether the topic was nitrates or the Little League team.

"I live here. My family lives here. My nieces, aunts have been integral in creating the community we have today," she added. "I am extremely proud of what Boardman and the surrounding county has done in the 30 years that I have lived here. Thank you all for continuing that path and doing the right thing."

Justice Court Report

Morrow County Justice of the Peace Glen Diehl has released the following report from the Morrow County Justice Court:

-Micah J Stillman, 29, of Lexington was cited for Violating the Basic Rule (VBR) and was fined \$165.

-Kholten Michael Ross, 19, of Canby, OR was cited for VBR and fined \$440.

-A juvenile from Ione was cited for VBR and fined \$265.

-Ariel Marie Knight, 34, of Heppner was cited for careless driving and fined \$265.

-Stanley O'Neil McKnight, 35, of Ione was cited for failure to maintain lane and no operator's license and was fined \$265 for each offense for a total of \$530.

Engineering firm requests additional funds

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Mayor Corey Sweeney responded by asking if the city had a guarantee that the state would reimburse the money.

"That's my biggest concern," said Sweeney. "The work has already been done. The bills have already been paid. Is the state going to look at this and say, 'We allocated our funds to you for these projects. This is after the fact?'"

Cutsforth said he had asked that and had been assured it would go through.

"I just don't like the precedent we're setting," said Adam Doherty.

Lamb put in that unlike larger areas that were easy to access, a small city like Heppner that was harder to get to might have to make some unusual allowances.

"It stretched out quite a bit with COVID," added Bates. "This took a year and a half longer than it was supposed to have taken."

"Why are we the ones paying for that?" asked Doherty.

"We're not really paying," said Bates, referencing the state funding.

"Aren't we?" responded Doherty. "Whether it comes out of the house bill or not, we're paying it because it's going to get out there and the community is going to say, 'Hey, they did their job, wrapped it up, and now we're paying it again.' "It's the precedent we're setting. We're going to tell everybody, 'You can do a job for the City of Heppner and then you can bill it again.'"

Sweeney asked Heppner Attorney Bill Kuhn where the city stood legally on such a move. Kuhn said the city was within legal parameters to pay more, and his only concern was whether the state would approve the handling of the funds.

"If they approve it, I don't think there's any city liability as such, but there's also no city obligation as such," said Kuhn. "But I think the council's already figured that out."

Sweeney said he also questioned it on moral grounds because it was taxpayer money. He asked whether the money left over went back to the taxpayers because the city wasn't able to use it all.

"It goes back to ODOT," said Cutsforth.

The council turned down the request, with Bates and Lamb voting in favor of the additional compensation in the 3-2 vote.

The council also discussed the closing bill from

Premier Excavation.

"This is kind of the same scenario but not the same scenario," said Cutsforth. He said Stripe Rite was supposed to come in the fall and do striping on the streets as part of the Premier Excavation contract but didn't get it done. He said he did not expect them now to be able to come back and paint until June. The state contract expires in March, and the state won't pay for work that was not done, he said.

Cutsforth said the city had three options. First, they could remove the item out of the contract, not do striping, and close out the project.

Second, they could work on getting an extension. Cutsforth said getting an extension from the state shouldn't be a problem, but to do something like center striping, the city would have to bring the surveyor back out, which would be added expense.

Third, he said his preference would be to use the ODOT funds to buy the material and have city crews do the work with torch down street bars. Torch down markings consist of preformed thermoplastic film installed by hand using a propane torch. The work wouldn't include the striping down the center of the streets, but mostly the stop bars and crosswalks. The stop bars and crosswalks are a legal requirement for the streets, but the center striping is not.

"In our experience, the stripes down the center of the street aren't quite as important, nor do they last quite as long," he said.

He added that if the city chose that route, it would cost considerably less and might be done as soon as St. Pat's. The HB 2017 money could be used to pay for materials, but probably would not cover the wages of the city crew.

Heppner Public Works Director Chad Doherty said the city crews could take care of it, but it would take a while as they were already short-staffed. Sweeney said he thought it would be a better use of resources for the city to get the extension rather than to have city workers spend time on it.

Bates said he preferred to see the torch down rather than the paint Stripe Rite contracted for, since it would last longer, and Sweeney said he thought the city should research it more.

"And then we can close this bill and be done with them," said Sweeney.

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