



# the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

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## Field narrowed to three for vacant commissioner seat

### Oregon Rural Action again on hand to grill commissioners, county staff

By Andrea Di Salvo

The search for a third Morrow County Commissioner is making headway, with a field of candidates narrowed to three who have been selected for interviews this week. The Morrow County Board of Commissioners also discussed support for a grant request from a Boardman fertilizer company and heard more citizen concerns at its regular board meeting last week in Heppner.

Morrow County Clerk Bobbi Childers reported receiving six filings for the vacant commissioner position by the time the application window closed Jan 31. Of those, the commissioners selected Gus Peterson, Mike McNamee and Roy Drago, Jr. to move on to interviews this week.

At the meeting, commissioners David Sykes and Jeff Wenholz discussed a letter they received from Margaret Hoffman, USDA Oregon's Rural Development State Director, asking for input on a Fertilizer Production Expansion Program (FPEP) grant request from True Organic Products in Boardman.

The FPEP was created to combat rising fertilizer prices, which have more than doubled since last year. In September 2022, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that \$500 million in grants would be available to increase American-made fertilizer production. True Organic Products is requesting \$4,999,999 in FPEP grant funding to construct a new organic fertilizer production facility in Boardman. It would include a 24,700 square foot building for blending and pelletizing fertilizer and 208,925 additional square feet of open-air product storage. True Organic Products says this would allow the company to more than double its production, increasing production of pelleted organic fertilizer by 15,000 tons.

The commissioners asked Morrow County Planner Tamra Mabbott for input, and she told the commissioners that True Organic Products had appeared before the board of commissioners last year requesting support for the grant application, but the board had not given it.

"They didn't object to it. They just didn't support it directly," Mabbott said,

adding that the issue was and continues to be that the company does not have a land use permit for the expansion of the business.

She said she got in touch with the company when she saw that the letter was on the board's agenda, and she believed they were now moving forward with applying for that permit, but that True Organic Products had previously begun the permit application process but had not completed it.

Mabbott provided a copy of a letter the planning department had sent to the company in November detailing what else the county needed in order to process the permit request. She said she also had other concerns.

"It's not abundantly clear that the use would qualify," she added. "It's in the airport industrial zone, and I don't see how this proposed expansion is airport related."

Wenholz questioned whether the grant would be specific to that piece of property, since it was for a business plan or proposal.

"I would think that we would want to support any established business in their endeavors to secure more federal money for expansion. Maybe if he (the business owner) can't make that work on that piece of property, maybe there's another piece of Port property that he'd be willing to relocate to and work with the Port," said Wenholz. "Again, I don't believe that the grant is tied to this piece of property."

Mabbott pointed out that the letter did reference expansion at the Tower Rd. location in Boardman, but also said that she thought the board could offer provisional support while making it clear they were not making a land use decision that day.

"And that, all things being equal, they would need to qualify and obtain the necessary land use permits," she added. "Which may mean they need to relocate."

Sykes asked if there was any other reason the previous board had withheld support, and Mabbott said it was really all about the permit and whether that was the right location.

"It has a lot of merit," she added. "Clearly there's federal, state, local need for it. It's just, is that the right location, and we don't know until we receive their application."

Sykes said he agreed with Wenholz that, as long as they made it clear there was no land use decision, he thought the board should support a local business in an effort to expand.

It was decided that Mabbott and Morrow County Counsel Justin Nelson should draft an appropriate letter of support and

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## Health district hires new ER provider, moves forward with Boardman remodel

By Andrea Di Salvo

The Morrow County Health District approved another emergency provider and took a step toward a remodel of its Boardman clinic at a regular board meeting Monday, Jan. 30, in Heppner.

The MCHD board voted to move forward with a bid from Clark/Kjos Architects out of Portland to draft plans for remodeling Boardman Immediate Care. The space of approximately 2,234 square feet is currently used by the district's physical therapy and occupational medicine.

The space is intended to house four exam rooms, an office for two providers, a reception desk and a larger waiting room to allow for eight to 10 patients, among other changes. The space occupied by the Murray's Drug Boardman pharmacy is not included in the remodel.

The bid was for basic services billed at their standard hourly rates, to a maximum of \$65,702.

The board also discussed bids to replace the roof of Boardman Immediate Care but tabled the decision when board members raised concerns over the life of the proposed roof.

Chief Operating Officer Nicole Mahoney informed the board that the roof on the Boardman building has had some "significant" leaks. Temporary repairs have been done, but more extensive repairs are needed to prevent further water damage in the building, she said.

The health district did get a bid for the cost of



Nicole Mahoney

repairing the roof, which came in at \$12,300. That was about half the cost of replacing the roof, Mahoney told the board, so they decided to request bids for replacement.

They received three bids, and Mahoney recommended the C&C Construction bid of \$25,950. She said the quote included labor and material to remove the tile down to the roof sheathing, and they would then decide how much needed to be re-shingled, at a maximum price of \$9,950 if they needed to re-shingle the entire roof. That would make the total project cost as much as \$35,900. The shingles would be regular composite able to withstand 130 mph winds and would have an expected life of 15 years.

Board member Aaron Palmquist questioned the expected life of the roof.

"I have to be honest; I

have a major concern about that," he said, adding that industry average was 30 to 40 years.

"And they don't last 30," board vice chair Diane Kilkenny added.



Emily Roberts

After hearing Palmquist's concerns, the board decided to revisit the decision in February after gathering more details about roofing options.

The board also approved a new contract for Family Nurse practitioner (FNP) Mark Stevens. Stevens will work in the emergency room (ER) full time, which will consist of eight days of 24-hour shifts each month. MCHD Chief Executive Officer Emily Roberts said came highly recommended, and that this would give them three full-time ER providers rather than rotating through other providers who also have other duties.

"It's better for resources, better for cost, better for continuity," said Roberts.

When asked where the district stood with ER doctors and whether more were needed, Roberts said, "I think we would probably still sign a locum if they wanted to, because it is always nice to have people in that pool, but I don't think that we could support another full time."

Dr. Michael Metzler and Dr. William Everts are both full time in the emergency room, and the district has a "handful" of locums, Roberts said. Locums are physicians who work in a practice temporarily. Dr. Rio Lion is looking at an ER locum contract that may come before the board next month, she said.

Also at the meeting, the board appointed Dr. Jianming Song to the medical staff and gave him emergency room and inpatient privileges. Song was previously approved by the board as a new provider.

Morrow County Assessor Mike Gorman was

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## Hughes under ethics investigation



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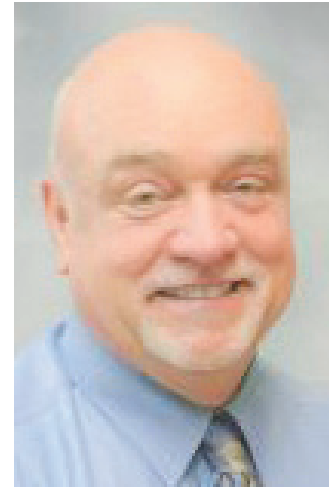
The Oregon Government Ethics Commission voted unanimously last Friday to begin an investigation of Michael Hughes of Boardman for possible misuse of department resources in his position as Boardman Rural Fire Protection District Chief.

The ethics commission

received a complaint that Hughes allegedly used the department fire truck and fire district staff to install a hot tub at his home. The complainant apparently provided a photo of the fire truck lowering the hot tub.

Hughes was not present at the hearing but submitted a statement that his contract allows him to use district equipment for his personal use and that the department also assists other community members with the fire truck. However, a preliminary investigation did not satisfy the commission that installing a hot tub fell within accepted personal use, and the commissioners voted 6-0 to pursue formal investigation.

## Green accepts settlement in county lawsuit



Darrell Green

Former Morrow County Administrator Darrell Green has accepted a settlement offered by Morrow County, according to court records. According to a settlement agreement filed with Morrow County Circuit Court, Green accepted a settlement of \$50,001 plus "reasonable costs and attorney fees" last week.

Green was the Morrow

County Administrator from November 2017 until the Morrow County Board of Commissioners terminated his employment in June of 2022. Green was terminated June 28 for allegedly violating a nepotism agreement involving his wife Debra, who also worked for the county in the health department.

In August of 2022, Green filed a civil suit against the county, claiming unlawful employment practices, wrongful discharge and violation of open meetings law. In his lawsuit, he sought \$250,000 in economic damages for lost income and \$500,000 in non-economic damages for mental stress, humiliation and inconvenience.

The county sought the settlement at the end of January. Green accepted the settlement via his attorney Feb. 1

## County hires interim administrator

### Vanderwall to start Feb. 15



Roberta Vanderwall

Morrow County has hired Roberta Vanderwall to be the new interim county administrator. Vanderwall

replaces Greg Sweek, who resigned from the position Jan. 13.

Vanderwall currently lives in Haines, OR. She has extensive prior administrative experience, mostly in city management. Her resume includes working for the cities of Lakeview, Coquille, Nyssa and North Powder.

Her start date will be Feb. 15.

## DeSpain Pizza grand opening this week

DeSpain Pizza is celebrating its grand opening in Heppner this week. The kickoff is Wednesday, Feb. 8, from noon to 4 p.m. The pizza shop will be open seven days a week. Normal business hours will be Sunday and Wednesday,

12-4 p.m., and Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday 4-8 p.m.

A full story will follow in next week's Heppner Gazette-Times. DeSpain Pizza is located at 111 North Court St.

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