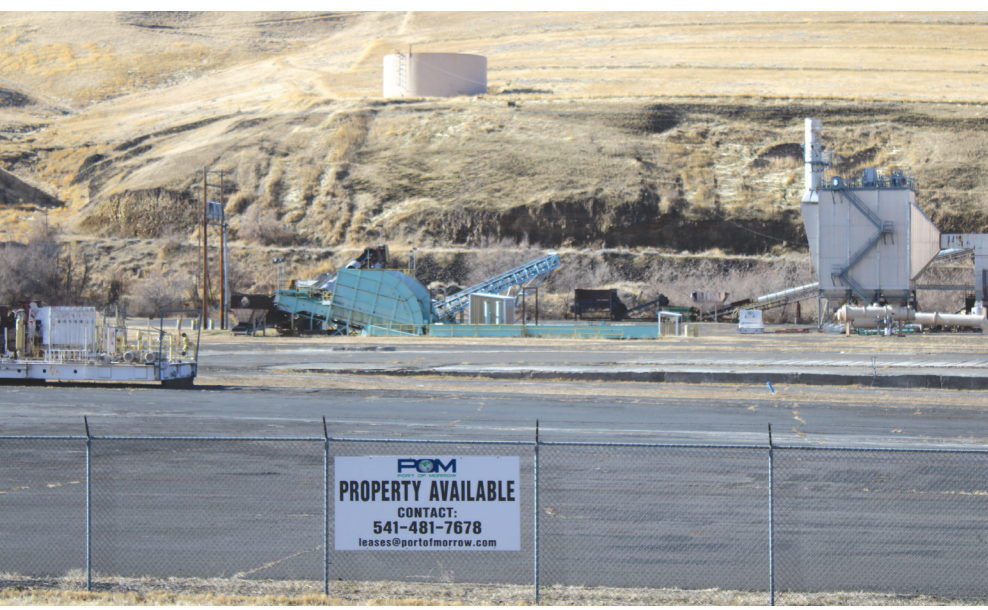


# Heppner needs more buildable land, but old mill site begins to show promise



The site of the old Kinzua mill, now the South Morrow County Industrial Park, has been left undeveloped because of being on the flood plan. Plans are underway to change that and add around 60 acres to South Morrow's buildable industrial land. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

By Andrea Di Salvo

Brian Points of Points Consulting shared some preliminary findings from his buildable-lands analysis of Heppner at a town hall Feb. 13. Points told the small crowd of council members and Heppner residents that data so far showed a limited amount of buildable land within the city limits or urban growth boundary (UGB).

Points Consulting, a firm based in Moscow, ID, held town hall meetings in all three South Morrow County cities as part of a Goal 9 assessment for the Willow Creek Valley.

Goal 9 refers to an Oregon Statewide Planning Goal. The Oregon Statewide Planning Program has 17 planning goals, 14 of which apply east of the Cascades. Goal 9 is a goal for economic development.

"Among other things, it means that cities and counties should have an economic development strategy," Morrow County Planner Tamra Mabbott told the group. Among other things, cities should have a 20-year supply of employment lands. Employment lands are places people work, either commercial or industrial property.

Points said the assessment is 60-75 percent done, with the final version probably being finished in April. If, after April, the numbers show that the cities don't have enough buildable lands, Mabbott said there are planning steps the communities can take.

"Urban growth boundary expansion is one of those steps," said Mabbott. "That's just one option. You could also look at your code. You could look at a lot of other things."

"You want to make sure that you have enough places for businesses to expand."

Points presented three maps that showed buildable lands inventory. One showed developed land, one showed vacant or re-developable land, and one showed the South Morrow County Industrial Park.

"That's actually something we would like your input on, because you live here, we live in Idaho," Points said of the maps. "It's important that we get this right. It's important that we know what the actual calculations are for what land can actually be used. That's really the heart of what this Goal 9 process is all about."

As far as the buildable lands inventory, project senior planner Ryan Hughes of Nexus Planning said they take their data for developed land from Morrow County tax assessors as well as zoning designations from the Oregon Dept. of Revenue.

Undeveloped means vacant or such low-level development as to be considered vacant. For re-developable, he said they took

guidance from an Oregon Administrative Rule, which defines it as a parcel that has land value that exceeds the value of the improvements.

"There may be some changes since the data was collected," Hughes said. "There may be particular lots that are improved or have been developed subsequently to our data collection, so that's where we really need eyes on the ground from some of you folks that can help us out."

"If you want your community to thrive, you need certain things. You need a place for people to live, you need places for people to work. There's a limited amount of land on which those things can happen," Points said, adding that, within the state, that amount has gotten more limited through the urban growth boundary process. "You can't just build whatever you want wherever you want. Those days are over."

"That takes more planning and it takes more forethought if you're actually going to provide those resources for your citizens," he added.

For residential lands, it means looking at what is available, whether the area has the right types of residential areas, and the ideal population density for the area.

For commercial lands, the question is whether there is space for commercial or industrial development. Looking at commercial lands, Points said the idea is to know whether a community has enough of those areas for the next 20 years.

"If you don't, then it's going to be really difficult for your city to grow, because then what are your options?" he said. Options he listed were out commuting, working from home or getting dense with the employment available. "All of those can happen organically, but they're not ideal," he said.

He said the still need to assess other supply constraints, as well as do a demand assessment.

"There's two sides of every economic equation, right? How much do you actually need?" Points asked. "If there's not unmet demand, then you really don't need more supply."

To determine that, he said, they look at industry and employment trends, existing employers and how much space they need, and where they're going to be going in the future. Part of that input they need locally.

"Only so much of that stuff is reflected in the data. The rest is more tacit or subliminal," said Points.

That said, Points did present some promising trends within Morrow County.

Morrow County has had strong employment growth, increasing 44 percent in an 11-year span. The

County's total employment increased 26 percent—higher than the state, and 40 percent higher than the national level.

However, despite employment increases, the communities in the Willow Creek Valley have struggled, particularly at moments when the region was struck by macroeconomic forces.

"It's a lot harder, I'll tell you that right off the bat, to get this type of granularity, this kind of data, for the city of Heppner," Points said. "There's no federal agency that tracks that. The data that we have is limited."

Morrow County as a whole has also experienced significant growth in wages, increasing 125 percent in 11 years. The county has grown 45 percent more than the state, 63 percent more than the nation in that span of time. Points said the Columbia River Enterprise Zone (CREZ) has helped boost earnings in Morrow County by a significant degree.

"That policy and the wage incentives that are built into it has probably really helped boost average wages within Morrow County," he said.

He also said that Morrow County has seen noteworthy growth in manufacturing, information and utilities; manufacturing has increased 59 percent since 2010. The information sector was nonexistent in the county in 2010, but now employs 600-plus workers and has a 2,400 percent growth rate.

"You need to think strategically about your economy and how it's going to develop. You don't have to have every form of employment. You don't have to have every form of industry within your town for it to thrive," Points said.

"Heppner may be too small of a town to have a yoga studio, a Starbucks, a Target," he added. "But there is an advantage to being in proximity to places that do, because then you can get the products and services, people can live in that area, and then you can start to build some kind of satellite economic development opportunities from that."

"Because at some point people don't want to drive 45 minutes to a restaurant. You need to have that locally if they're going to live in that community, and build as a satellite to places like Boardman, Pendleton," Points said.

For Heppner, the bad news was that total employment was falling in the last 10 years. However, employment increased in 2020 with new workers entering the labor market, and median household income has increased except for the 2019-2020 pandemic.

"You can see that it hasn't been exploding in

# Morrow County School District audit

-Continued from PAGE ONE has led his teams to multiple championships.

"It goes well beyond just being successful on the court, on the diamond, on the football field," said Younger. "Also a big part of the criteria is, they want to look at community service. They want to look at what they do in their schools. They want to look at the organizations they belong to. This is the best of the best in our eyes."

In addition to coaching football at Heppner High School since 1990, Grant also has served as the school's athletic director since 2001 and has been an assistant coach for several other sports.

Grant has served on the Oregon Athletic Coaches Association and the Oregon Athletic Directors Association Boards of Directors, and he has served on several OSAA committees.

"He's well respected throughout the state," Younger said. "When he speaks, people listen."

Younger presented Grant with an award for Section 8 Coach of the Year. He did not have the national award in hand, but said there would be an award banquet in May. Grant expressed his appreciation before the board and audience.

"Thank you for your support," he said. "This is a community award."

The board also heard from auditor Rob Tremper of Dickey & Tremper. This is the company's fourth year as the district's auditor. He noted that it was a challenging year for the school district as it transitioned from using the education service district's financial services to in-house financial director Gabriel Hansen. He also credited the district with working through new accounting standards established by the state.

"Overall, I think it went really well," said Tremper.

He did note some findings, such as PERS numbers not getting recorded correctly right away or a lack of supporting documents for some bills, but said the issues had either been corrected before the audit or were fixable. None of them affected the clean opinion of the audit.

"With just a few findings, I don't think it gives enough credit that there were a lot of things that were done right," he said.

He did suggest extra review in some areas, since MCSDD was no longer using InterMountain ESD's services. "A second set of eyes is always helpful," he added.

"We do plan to have some ESD oversight," MCSDD Superintendent Matt Combe responded.

Heppner Jr./Sr. High School Counselor Jill Mill-

er also gave the board an overview of the work she has been doing over the school year. Miller divides her time between the high school and elementary school.

"It's amazing to see what we've accomplished with a part-time position," said Miller.

She updated the board on a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum called Sown to Grow that the district has been using at Heppner Elementary School. The curriculum includes periodic in-classroom guidance lessons by school counselors, with real-time "emotional check-ins" via computer in between.

"We had one instance where it flagged a student that it was something we should attend to, so it was interesting to see what that looked like," Miller said.

Students also engage in self-reflection, which Miller says will later lead to academic goal setting.

At the high school level, Miller reported on an academic monitoring system the school is using.

"It flags kids who aren't being as successful as we would want them to be," Miller said.

The system then automatically sends personalized messages to parents letting them know, for example, that their child may be failing a class.

Miller also has conducted campus visits with students and keeps an eye on student transcripts to make sure they're on track to graduate.

"Because that's kind of why we're here," she quipped.

Miller said goals for the future include a career exploration unit, especially for seventh through ninth grades, past graduate panels, futures night and a club startup to support post-secondary plans.

Human Resources Executive Director Erin Stocker also showed the board two calendar options the district will be presenting to staff.

"Talking to staff at all levels, there's been a lot of interest in an option that could address student and staff attendance on Fridays when Monday is a holiday," Stocker said.

She told the board average student attendance

dropped from the typical 92 percent down to 80 percent on Fridays "if we're lucky," and that staff attendance was also lower on Fridays.

"That isn't just that our staff doesn't want to work on Fridays," she added. "There's also a lot of other things that come into people's lives that impact them on Fridays." For instance, she said, the district needs teachers to coach, but that can create a conflict with sports schedules on Fridays.

Both calendar options include 150 student days for the year with four STEAM Fridays. One option would be a pre-Labor Day start on Aug. 28 and would go to June 13, though Stocker said that is not later than most other area school districts. There would be no school on any Friday after a Monday holiday, but there would be one early-release Friday the week before winter break, Dec. 15.

The second option would have a pre-Labor Day start on Aug. 28 and would include student school days on Fridays when that Monday is a holiday.

The board also approved a math adoption plan for grades seven through 12.

MCSDD board member Marie Shrimmer said she had met with secondary school staff to discuss curriculum for the coming year, and they had a math adoption recommendation she would like the board to approve so she could start the ordering process. Due to ongoing paper shortage, she said, the earlier the books could be ordered, the better.

Seventh and eighth grades and algebra selected a program called Ed Gems by Shannon McCaw. Geometry selected a title called Big Ideas from Cengage. College level courses will remain aligned with materials from BMCC. The staff's next step will be to focus on building out plus-one math courses, which focus on either college readiness or workforce readiness skills. The first plus-one will focus on technical math and personal finance, she told the board.

The next MCSDD meeting will be March 13 at 6 p.m. at A.C. Houghton Elementary in Irrigon. The meeting will also be accessible via Zoom.

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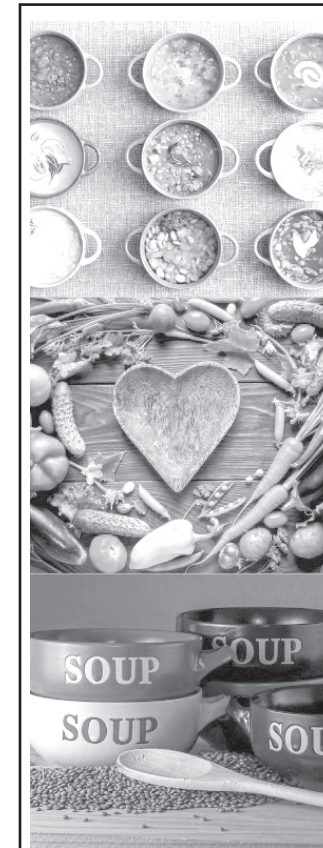


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