

Morrow County Health District moves forward with legal action

-Continued to PAGE ONE
 trative time and associated expenditures.

In addition, the health district board determined Boardman Fire to be "engaged in a nuisance," a finding which allows them to seek enforcement through injunction issued either by the Oregon Health Authority or Morrow County Circuit Court.

Along with the final order, the MCHD board voted unanimously to file a civil claim seeking an injunction and declaratory relief against BFRD and Morrow County based upon the default order and the county's "continued efforts at restructuring the ASA boundaries." An injunction is a court order requiring an entity to do or cease doing a specific action.

These steps come after several months of failed mediation and growing antagonism between the health district and Boardman Fire.

Boardman Fire Chief Michael Hughes first approached the Morrow County Board of Commissioners seeking ambulance licensing in February of 2022. At the time, Hughes stated that he didn't want to go into competition with the health district, which already provides ambulance services to all of Morrow County.

"I am under no illusion that the health district does not have primary responsibility for ambulance service in the Boardman area," he told commissioners. "I have no desire to be in direct competition with the health district."

Hughes said he wanted licensing to transport for Good Shepherd, for the military on Bombing range, and as a backup to the health district.

The health district expressed concern over any additional ambulance service cutting into its revenue and hurting its ability to provide the best service to all county residents. In a letter to the commissioners, health district CEO Emily Roberts cited a "possible negative impact" on cost-based reimbursements from Medicare.

"If Boardman Fire wishes to license their ambulance, the district is in support of this, provided that Boardman Fire enters into a mutually agreeable contract with the District concerning the operation of this ambulance to ensure that the services currently provided by the District to the entire county are not jeopardized," Roberts

wrote. Boardman Fire apparently did not want to enter into a contract with Morrow County Health District. In March of last year, Hughes asked that the county's Ambulance Service Area plan be amended to allow Boardman Fire to "attend all emergency calls within Boardman Fire District regardless of subject matter of the calls." At that time, the ASA advisory committee considered the request, and it was denied.

By May of 2022, both parties had hired attorneys to represent them in the dispute. In August, Hughes asked the board of commissioners to appoint a committee to work on the dispute, and in September, the county hired professional mediator Elizabeth Heckathorn to oversee negotiations.

After two sessions, MCHD requested a new mediator, citing an "escalating atmosphere of bullying and intimidation." Heckathorn was scheduled to brief the board of commissioners Nov. 2, but withdrew from the agenda after objections from the health district that any public mediation reports would violate Oregon's confidentiality laws.

Hughes continued to request space on the board of commissioners' agenda, but previous commissioners Jim Doherty and Melissa Lindsay resisted putting a license request on the agenda, saying the fire district needed to first provide evidence of need for the ambulances before the county would consider moving forward with a license.

It was with mediation broken down and the two sides still at loggerheads that the new Morrow County commissioners took office in January. They reopened the conversation by giving Hughes time on the agenda at the Feb. 22 meeting in Heppner.

Hughes did not directly address the issue of licensing for the Boardman Fire ambulances, but instead requested that the board of commissioners repeal county ordinance MC-C-4-98 (1998 ASA), which lays out the regulation of ambulance service providers in the county. Uncertain of the possible ramifications, the Morrow County commissioners decided to seek independent legal counsel at that point.

Hughes appeared before the board again on March 15, requesting a letter of support to the Oregon Health Authority regarding

Boardman Fire ambulance licensing.

In a 2-1 split vote April 5, the commissioners agreed to draft a letter of support for BFRD to pursue ambulance licensing in Morrow County.

However, board chair David Sykes said attorney Bob Blackmore had advised them not to repeal the 1998 ASA ordinance, but to instead move forward with preparing a new ASA plan to address and resolve many of the issues in the dispute. He also said counsel had advised them the 2021 ASA plan was not legally effective, as it was never legally approved by Morrow County.

"Counsel suggested a new ASA plan would include many of the provisions of that plan and mentioned that it would be a good starting point," Sykes said at the meeting.

The board voted unanimously to move forward with a new ASA plan with county administrator Roberta Vanderwall, county counsel Justin Nelson and county emergency manager Paul Gray taking the lead with counsel from Blackmore.

The board of commissioners faced backlash over those decisions, with MCHD threatening legal action against both Boardman Fire and the commissioners, while public comments at the April 19 meeting were indicative of the high emotional tide the issue was—and is—causing throughout the county.

Since then, the board of commissioners has held two public hearings in Heppner regarding the ASA, with two more hearings scheduled for May 10 in Boardman and Irrigon.

Despite the board of commissioners having made no statement regarding changing or adding ambulance providers, the hearings in Heppner were largely pro-health district, with many employees and board members making emotional pleas about patient care, while others feared loss of funding would lead to loss of ambulance service for the majority of the county.

"Hospitals in Oregon are operating on razor-thin margins, and any changes to their financial stability may jeopardize their financial viability to remain open," Eric Swanson, President of Adventist Health Tillamook, wrote in his testimony, adding that assigning another ambulance service provider may affect the cost-based reimbursement the health district receives

and "may result in a loss of over \$1 million to the district."

Meanwhile, MCHD is sticking to its guns and claiming that both Boardman Fire and the Morrow County Board of Commissioners are out of line.

"Morrow County Health District is the only ambulance service provider authorized under ORS 198.010. As such, Morrow County Health District will continue to provide ambulance service to all of Morrow County," the health district said in a statement to the Gazette-Times. "The Morrow County Board of Commissioners do not have authority to circumvent ORS 198.010 and therefore have no authority to award any portion of Morrow County to another special district for ambulance service."

WCCC Sunday men's play results

Nineteen participated in men's play on a cold, rainy Sunday morning May 7 at Willow Creek Country Club. Results are as follows:

Least Putts—John Edmundson, 28.

Net—1st/2nd (tie), John Edmundson-Scott Burrigh, 62; 3rd, David Allstott, 64.

Gross—1st, Dennis Peck, 65; 2nd, Charlie Ferguson, 69; and 3rd (tie), Rick Johnston, Steve Marlatt, Tim Hedman and Donald Mathews, 75.

There is no organized play next Sunday, May 14, on Mother's Day. The next scheduled play is on May 21, with Tom Shear and Roger Ehrmantraut hosting.

WWW.HEPPNER.NET
 SUBMIT NEWS, ADVERTISING
 & ANNOUNCEMENTS
 LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
 SEND US PHOTOS
 START A NEW SUBSCRIPTION

WEEKLY SHOPPER
 RESERVE YOUR SEAT
 BY NOON ON THURSDAY
 (541) 676-5667



Proudly Serving
 Morrow County Veterans

MAY 12th
**GROCERY OUTLET
 ALIVE AND WELL
 SAFEWAY PLAZA
 SHERI'S**

MAY 19th
**WAL-MART
 SAFEWAY PLAZA
 BELLINGER'S
 DENNY'S**

Youth Night



Thursday, May 18
Doors open 5:30
Free Dinner 6:00
Prizes Drawn at 7:00

Open to all kids and their families.
Raffle tickets available for hundreds of dollars in prizes including one camo pistol grip 12 gauge turkey shotgun and one Henry lever action .22 rifle

Contact Corey Sweeney for more information at 541-256-0355



HEPPNER ELKS 358
 "WHERE FRIENDS MEET"
 541-676-9181 142 N MAIN ST

**PORT OF MORROW
 COMMISSIONER**
 POSITION #5

**VOTE
 WES
 KILLION**

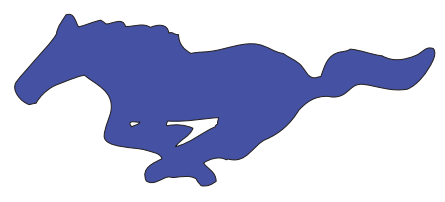
**DEDICATED TO THE PEOPLE.
 FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE.**

Paid for by Wes and Mary Killion

Heppner Les Schwab would like to wish the Mustangs Good Luck in the District playoff game!



The Mustang boys baseball team is the number one team headed into the district playoffs. Back L-R: Assistant Coach Hayden Hyatt, Karver Wilkins, Jaime Cavan, Tucker Ashbeck, Mason Orem, Thomas Bales, Ryan Haugen and Coach Tim Wilkins. Front L-R: Conner Wilson, Shad Greenup, Caden George, Carson Eynetich, Cameron Proudfoot and Caleb George. -Photo by Tylynn Cimmiyotti



District playoff Friday in Heppner at 4:00 PM



**124 N. MAIN STREET HEPPNER OR
 (541) 676-9481**