



the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

50¢
VOL. 143 NO. 20 10 Pages Wednesday, May 17, 2023 Morrow County, Heppner, Oregon

Health district launches \$4.3 million lawsuit against county, Boardman Fire

By Andrea Di Salvo

Morrow County Health District ramped up the debate over ambulance services in Morrow County when it carried out threats to take legal action against Morrow County and Boardman Fire Rescue District (BFRD) last week.

Thursday, May 11, the health district filed a civil complaint against Morrow County, Boardman Fire Rescue District and Boardman Fire Chief Michael Hughes in Morrow County Circuit Court. The health district is seeking an injunction against the development of a new Ambulance Service Area (ASA) plan, as well as monetary claims totaling at least \$4,372,350. In addition, MCHD is asking that the matter be settled by a jury trial.

Part of the dispute centers around the legitimacy of the 2021 ASA plan; the health district considers the plan valid, while the Morrow County Board of Commissioners says it is not because the correct legal process was not fol-

lowed. Furthermore, Morrow County Commission Chair David Sykes said it is the county's legal obligation to develop, update and replace the current 1998 ASA plan.

For the time being, the board of commissioners has stated the county is operating under the 1998 ASA plan, which designated the health district as the sole ambulance service provider. At the same time, the county has made it clear that MCHD was not provided with a "perpetual right" under the 1998 ASA Plan.

As the county works to develop a new ASA plan, a county release has stated that it will seek input from "all parties providing or interested in providing ambulance services, and all parties who wish to be consulted or provide advice regarding the Plan and the boundaries of ambulance service areas." Morrow County has never officially stated that it intends to rewrite the ASA boundaries or include Boardman Fire as a provider.

"The complaints and allegations are baseless and inflammatory, misrepresent the process and actions to the public, and seek to prevent the Board of Commissioners from exercising their obligations," Sykes said in a statement regarding the lawsuit.

Nonetheless, the health district is asking for a temporary restraining order followed by a permanent injunction stopping Morrow County from either moving or disputing the ASA boundaries in Morrow County for at least the five-year span of the 2021 ASA, saying that Morrow County would be in breach of contract to do so.

MCHD also cites "substantial expenditures" following the drafting of the 2021 ASA, including a transition from volunteer to paid EMS staff, in order to accommodate increased county demand on ambulance services.

Another MCHD concern is the potential loss of cost-based reimbursement for its ambulance services.

The health district says the loss of that funding, an estimated one million dollars per year, could threaten ambulance services throughout the county, as well as costing lost jobs associated with those services.

So, as an alternative to the injunction, the health district is asking for the county to pay the difference between cost-based reimbursement versus actual reimbursement for the next three years, to the tune of \$3 million, plus \$100,000 potential loss of hospital revenue and \$1.1 million in damages, for a total of 4.2 million.

The lawsuit also makes allegations of conflict of interest against Morrow County Commissioner Jeff Wenzholz, saying his position on the Good Shepherd Health Care Board of Trustees caused him to act against the best interests of Morrow County residents. While Wenzholz was not listed as a defendant in the lawsuit, the health district has "reserved the right to

-Continued to PAGE SEVEN

Heppner residents complain about loose dogs City park restrooms again vandalized

By Andrea Di Salvo

Complaints about loose dogs in Heppner have been on the rise, but residents appeared at a Heppner City Council Meeting last week to complain about one set of dogs in particular.

One Heppner resident spoke up during public comment and complained about Kenny Stookey's dogs. She said they run around everywhere, and she is constantly finding their droppings in her yard. She also said at least one of the dogs is aggressive, and she is concerned because they have a lot of kids on their street.

"I was just wondering if we could do something about it, because it is becoming a problem," she said.

Another resident also expressed concerns and added that Stookey had been living in a motorhome under a canopy on the Butch and Judie Laughlin property, supposedly just until the motorhome's roof gets fixed. He said that Stookey had told them several times over the last few months that he would not be there much longer, but he was still there.

"I don't know how much longer he's going to be allowed to squat," the

man told the council. "If I make a move to talk to him or something, he goes into his motorhome and does not come out."

Both residents said they had come to the city with the issue before and that there had been multiple complaints, even involving the sheriff's office.

Heppner Mayor Corey Sweeney asked whether the city had spoken with the property owners, since it was on private property, and Heppner City Manager Kraig Cutsforth replied he had spoken with Butch Laughlin before he died but had not spoken with the children since then.

"Why don't we put this on a timeline?" said Sweeney, adding that the city needs to speak with the property owners and get Stookey trespassed from the property if necessary. At the very least, council members discussed getting visual evidence of the dogs at large so law enforcement can issue citations.

"If you don't see any change, by all means, come to the meeting next month, or into the office sooner, if things escalate," Sweeney told the residents at the meeting.

Council member Cody High added that he would like them to return for the next council meeting so there could be an update on what had been accomplished "good, bad or indifferent."

Heppner Public Works Director Chad Doherty reported that the Heppner City Park restroom was heavily vandalized again.

Doherty said he inspected the video from the park camera, got what he could from it and turned the video over to Morrow

County Sheriff's Office. He said one light was totally destroyed and paper towel dispensers in both restrooms were completely ripped off the wall and broken. City workers also had to replace a toilet paper dispenser and soap dispenser, as well as clean up the restroom.

"It was pretty bad," said Doherty. He added that he had not heard back if there had been any results from the investigation.

Vandalism like this was a large part of the reason for the city's recent purchase of new security cameras to set up throughout town. Cutsforth told the council that the city had already received the Verkada cameras, and those would probably be installed in June.

The council also discussed the property the city had purchased on Chase Street in order to expedite the clean-up on the burned-out house on the property. The city had offered the house to the fire department for a practice burn, but Heppner Fire Chief Steve Rhea said there was too much still in the house—possibly more than there had been when the house burned—and that it also posed too much danger to nearby trees and power lines.

The city will move ahead with demolition instead. Sweeney requested that it be put out for bid since the projected demolition cost is more than \$10,000. Cutsforth said some funding for the demolition is available through Willow Creek Valley Economic Development Group.

In the issue of fires, the council also addressed the inaccessible South Main Street fire hydrant they had

discussed at the last meeting. The issue is that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the fire department to access the hydrant.

The hydrant was placed there in 1947. At that time there was a through street at that location, but that's no longer the case.

"So, through all the changes, public safety access was never kept?" asked High.

"It's a hard place to get into either way," replied council member Dale Bates.

The council discussed adding an additional hydrant further out toward the city limits. It would not solve the accessibility issue for the original hydrant, but it would provide better coverage for the houses on the outskirts of town.

Cutsforth also brought to the council a proposed land transfer. A landowner in Heppner apparently has a small, triangular piece of property that extends into a city street. Cutsforth said he wanted to check with the city attorney about the feasibility of the landowner transferring that piece to

-Continued to PAGE NINE

Morrow County, Amazon Web Services ink six new data center deals

Includes \$30 million up front payments, and participation in bonded debt



Morrow County and the Columbia River Enterprise Zone (CREZ) have signed six new data center agreements with Amazon Web Services (AWS), marking a significant investment for the company in the region. The agreements include a unique benefit to the local communities, with a \$5 million Community Development Contribution per agreement, a new benefit over past deals as AWS commits to helping fund local projects.

In addition to the up-front payments, the company committed to paying into any newly-issued general obligation bonding agreements related to public utilities, educational, fire, public health, parks and recreation facilities, and public safety. The bonded debt obligation shows AWS's

commitment to investing in the local communities and infrastructure.

The Community Development Contribution payments are directly linked with the start of construction, which allows jurisdictions to begin funding capital improvement projects earlier. AWS expects to pay its first \$5 million payment to Morrow County by the end of 2023. This type of up-front contribution is uncommon, and it sets these agreements apart from previous ones.

The six agreements will create job opportunities in the region through data center construction and operations, generating future tax revenue that would not be gained from the current vacancy in the lots. The economic impact of the new investments will also be throughout the communities and provide a boost to the local economy.

The total dollar investments in both Morrow and

-Continued to PAGE SIX

Governor meets with county officials



Governor Tina Kotek (right) paid a visit to Morrow County on May 3, and Morrow County Public Health Director Robin Canaday attended a lunch with her. -Contributed photo

In a bid to strengthen ties with local communities and address regional concerns, Oregon Governor Tina Kotek paid a visit to Morrow County May 3.

As part of the visit Governor Kotek had lunch with several local officials, including Morrow County Public Health Director Robin Canaday. They talked about issues that included the nitrate water contamination in the county.

Canaday said the governor was very personable and had "a good sense of humor."

"All in all, it was a good lunch visit and we discussed a lot of issues," Canaday said of the visit and her time with the governor.

Morrow County Commission Chair David Sykes was also invited to the lunch but was unable to attend

since it was on the same day as the regular commission meeting. Governor Kotek later called Sykes and "we had a nice discussion and I told her I hoped to meet her someday," Sykes said.

During her visit, Governor Kotek toured several key locations, including agricultural sites, educational institutions, and infrastructure projects. Notably, she visited a recently established vocational training center, where she spoke with students and instructors about the importance of workforce development and skills training.

Governor Kotek's visit provided an opportunity for community members to voice their concerns and offer input on a range of topics, including education, healthcare and transportation.



POLARIS
UPGRADE YOUR RIDE

ELEVATE YOUR ADVENTURE

NEW 2023 MODELS

CHECK OUT THE NEW 2023 POLARIS LINEUP. CONTACT US TO RESERVE YOUR RIDE TODAY.

Morrow County Grain Growers Inc.



CALL
541-989-8221
ext 204
for more information

WARNING: Polaris® off-road vehicles can be hazardous to operate and are not intended for on-road use. Driver must be at least 16 years old with a valid driver's license to operate. Passengers, if permitted, must be at least 12 years old. All riders should always wear helmets, eye protection, and protective clothing. Always use seat belts and call nets or doors (as equipped). Never engage in stunt driving, and avoid excessive speeds and sharp turns. Riding and alcohol/drugs don't mix. All riders should take a safety training course. Call 800-342-3764 for additional information. Check local laws before riding on trails. ©2022 Polaris Inc.

POLARIS | OFF ROAD