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Boardman Fire responds to lawsuit with legal action

By Andrea Di Salvo
The saga over ambulance services in Morrow County continued last week when Boardman Fire Rescue District responded to the Morrow County Health District's lawsuit with a legal petition of its own. On June 7, Boardman Fire Rescue District (BFRD) filed a petition for writ of review and to stay proceedings pending review in Morrow County Circuit Court. The petition came as a response to a May 2 default order by the Morrow County Health District (MCHD) and a subsequent lawsuit filed by the health district on May 10 of this year. MCHD's lawsuit against BFRD, Boardman Fire Chief Michael Hughes and Morrow County sought a restraining order and injunction against BFRD and Hughes, which would prohibit the fire department from engaging in ambulance services in Morrow County. Monetary claims against Hughes and Board-

man Fire included \$3 million for estimated loss of cost-based reimbursement, damages in the amount of \$1,203,350 for tortious interference with business relations between the health district and the county, plus an additional \$169,000 in fines for what the health district says are multiple violations of the 1998 ASA plan. In response, Boardman Fire is now asking the court to order the health district and related entities to stop any further proceedings in the matter, including further prosecution of the declaratory and injunctive relief MCHD is seeking against Boardman Fire. BFRD is also asking for the court to reverse or annul the health district's default order in full. While both the health district and the county have released statements—or been downright outspoken—about the conflict over Boardman ambulance services in Boardman, Boardman Fire has been largely silent about the law-

suit. In its own legal case, however, the fire district now says that MCHD has no jurisdiction or authority over BFRD under the 1998 Ambulance Service Area plan (ASA). The 1998 ASA is the plan under which the county has stated it is currently operating until a new plan can be created. Boardman Fire says the plan vests the "County Court"—now the board of commissioners—with both jurisdiction and authority over the 1998 ordinance, not the health district. BFRD also states that the Morrow County Emergency Medical Services Advisory Committee and Quality Assurance Subcommittee are operating illegally because they were appointed by the MCHD board and not the county commissioners. BFRD also contends that it is not a party to the 1998 ASA at all, since it neither fits the definition of an ambulance service provider nor holds an ambulance service area under

the ASA. "Yet, despite MCHD's lack of jurisdiction and authority over BFRD under either ASA Plan, MCHD has nonetheless improperly sought to enforce its unlawful and improper findings and orders against BFRD..." the lawsuit states. In addition, BFRD claims that the health district's efforts to keep Boardman Fire from being dispatched to 9-1-1 calls in Boardman are illegal, calling MCHD's claims that the fire district was call jumping inaccurate and malicious. Finally, Boardman Fire says that, even if MCHD had jurisdiction over them, the health district is operating in "bad faith" based on its own business interests and not for any legitimate reason. Meanwhile, Boardman Fire, Hughes and the county have each been issued a summons under the health district's lawsuit, with no further proceedings scheduled at this time.

Boardman considers homeless camping ordinance

By Andrea Di Salvo
The Boardman City Council approved the first reading of a homeless camping ordinance, adopted a new budget and learned about the progress of a proposed urban renewal area during its June 6 meeting. The city council unanimously approved the first reading of a new homeless camping ordinance, prompted by House Bill 3115. The bill, which passed the Oregon Legislature in 2021, requires cities to make "objectively reasonable" rules about when, where and how people can "sit and lie" outdoors on public property. It also requires cities to provide alternatives if they do not allow camping on public property. It goes into effect July 1. "In order for us to enforce the camping and the homeless activities that are going on, we have to have an ordinance in place," Boardman City Manager pro tem Rick Stokoe told the council. The city says the Boardman ordinance aims to allow individuals and families who are experiencing the temporary effects of homelessness to camp in relatively safe and sanitary locations while they are actively seeking access

to stable and affordable housing. Stokoe said the city has been working with multiple entities during the crafting of the ordinance, including Stepping Stones Alliance in Umatilla County. "Once we have this ordinance in effect and we've got the IGA (intergovernmental agreement) with those entities, we can help these folks that need shelter and services," Stokoe added. Boardman Planning Official Carla McLane spoke more to the purpose of the ordinance and the role of entities like Stepping Stones and Umatilla County's Project Path. "The ordinance that you're being asked to look at tonight and give full consideration of is a Boardman approach to help manage what could be coming after the first of July," said McLane. "What this does is give Boardman the opportunity to manage what happens on public property and how that functions relative to when folks arrive in Boardman or our own citizens find themselves in a tough place." The council will be scheduling a special meeting later this month for

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Cyclists pause in Heppner during coast-to-coast trek

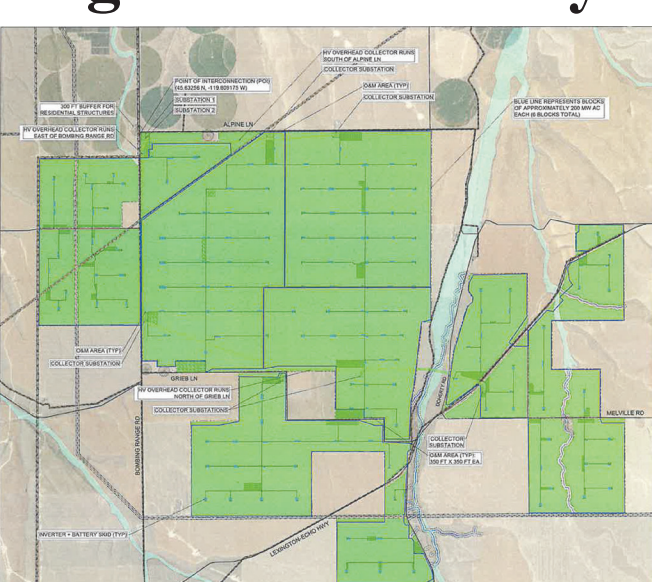


Three Northern Virginian cyclists and their support driver stopped in Heppner for lunch during a 3,600-mile trek from Oregon to Delaware. L-R: Rob Garratt, SAG driver Pam Wimberly, Heidi Cummings and Phil Grisdela. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

By Andrea Di Salvo
A group of three cyclists from Northern Virginia is on a mission to cycle from Oregon to Delaware, covering a distance of 3,600 miles in just 37 days. The cyclists—Heidi Cummings, Rob Garratt, and Phil Grisdela—are averaging 94 miles per day and have been gaining an average of 4,000 feet per day in their climb toward the Blues. To support the cyclists, Pam Wimberly is driving the Support and Gear (SAG) vehicle (which she prefers to call the GAS, Gear and Support, vehicle). The group's support vehicle is Grisdela's car, which he drove 4,000 miles across Canada to be a part of this journey. The group's age ranges from 55 to 65 years. Already, they have been cycling through challenging terrains and weather conditions, with more to come in

the next weeks. Even though the cyclists are the ones who might be considered to be doing the hard work, Grisdela took care to point out the importance of the SAG driver. "They have the car, and if the car doesn't move, we're in trouble," said Grisdela. Wimberly has been with the group since the start of their journey in Tillamook, OR, and will be their support driver until Missoula, MT. After that, another support driver will take over until Rapid City, SD, and a third will drive from Rapid City to Ligonier, PA. Finally, a fourth driver will take over for the final leg of the journey to Lewes, DE. The small group stopped in Heppner for lunch June 5 before continuing their climb east into the Blue Mountains.

Morrow County to be home to Northwest's largest solar facility



A map of the proposed Sunstone solar project to be located near Hwy. 207 and Bombing Range. -Contributed

By Andrea Di Salvo
The Morrow County Board of Commissioners heard an update on the planned Sunstone Solar project at its June 7 meeting in Heppner. Logan Stephens, Senior Director of Project Development for Pine Gate Renewables, was present at the meeting to update commissioners on the project. Pine Gate is based in North Carolina, but is developing, owning and operating renewable energy facilities nationwide. Sunstone is a proposed 1,200-megawatt solar energy and energy storage project that would be located about halfway between Heppner and Boardman, roughly in the North Lex

area. The bulk of the project would be north of 207 from just east of Bombing Range Rd. to Doherty Rd. "This is an area that already has a lot of renewable energy and transmission infrastructure with a number of windfarms and solar projects proposed in that area," Stephens said. Sunstone will connect to an existing transmission line owned by Umatilla Electric Co-op. That line runs to Boardman and connects to a Bonneville Power substation. Sunstone Solar was previously named Echo Solar, but parent company Pine Gate Renewables changed the name to avoid confusion with the town of Echo and the similarly-named Echo Windfarms. The project was originally developed by Gallatin Power, Stephens said, and was previously presented to the board by Gallatin's Jeff Fox. The project is currently in the development stage. The company plans to file its preliminary application to the Oregon Dept. of Energy by the end of this month. Because of that, Pine Gate is currently fo-

cus on impacts relating to the agricultural economy, environmental resources, housing and transportation. "To make sure that when we bring workers in, they're going to have a place to stay and be able to get out to the site every day," said Stephens. They're also engaging with local tribes regarding cultural resources, as well as looking into the best way to source labor and the project's water needs. "We really pride ourselves on building strong partnerships at the local and state and national level," said Stephens. "Part of my role and the role of my team going forward is to make sure that we're working closely with the community, engaging with a variety of stakeholders and making sure that we address all the impacts from the project and really try to make this project a success for everybody." Sunstone will be the largest solar facility in the Pacific Northwest and among the largest in the country, Stephens told the commissioners. The 1,200-MW output is roughly equal to power for 228,000 homes for a year. "So we're pretty excited about that," he said. "As part of that, we need to develop the project with very careful consideration for the land and for all of the impacts that are going to come along with the project, as well as the benefits." Pine Gate signed a PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) agreement with the county last November for an estimated \$8.4 million in PILOT payments per year over the first 17 years of operation. The project would then transition out of the PILOT program and into normal taxation. The company estimates that the

PILOT, property tax and statutory tax payments over the four-decade life of the facility would total around \$376 million. "We hope that will help enable the county to make investments in some of the infrastructure here in the area," Stephens said. The company also estimates the project would create more than 600 local jobs during construction. "We're still kind of working through the sourcing for that, but we expect a decent portion of that we'll be able to source from within an hour, hour-and-a-half commute from here," he added. Once Sunstone's application is filed, Stephens said that will begin a 12- to 18-month process to get a site certificate. They hope to begin construction early in 2026 and build the project out in phases over a period of about four years. Sunstone should become fully operational by 2030. The land the solar project will be located on has been in dryland wheat production. Stephens said the company was also working to address the impacts from taking that land out of production.

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