



First Town Hall Meeting Held for New Morrow County Circuit Court Building

By Chris Sykes

The issue of the new courthouse in Heppner has sparked a flurry of questions and concerns from the local community. Residents are eager to know the details of the project, particularly regarding the timeline and potential impact on the surrounding area.

In a bid to address the growing concerns over the “inadequate facilities” of the Morrow County Circuit Court, the first town hall meeting was held to discuss the construction of a new courthouse building. The meeting, held at the Bartholomew building in Heppner, aimed to inform the public about the pressing need for a modern and functional court facility.

The newly-hired county administrator, Matt Jensen, ran the meeting and highlighted the numerous shortcomings of the current courthouse, citing its outdated design and lack of compliance with modern standards. Structural, electrical, mechanical, and fire protection systems were deemed insufficient, while

Fairground Points

- Site Size: 2.2 acres (96,000 sf.)
- Zoning: R2 (Residential)
- South facing slope is ideal for solar orientation and daylight. Grading at north parcel is more level.
- Mostly privacy and views to the east
- Site is out of flood zones
- No on-site structures to be demolished.
- Northwest site assess easement to be procured.
- Main public access is from the south.
- Close proximity to residences could be buffered by landscaping.



~ Contributed Photo

the absence of proper ADA accessibility and seismic considerations raised serious concerns. Additionally, the limited space within the courthouse posed significant challenges, with cramped office areas, inadequate jury space, and difficulties in accessing the courtroom. The absence of

conference spaces for attorneys and clients, as well as the lack of sally ports, further compounded the issues faced by the court.

To address these pressing concerns, the county engaged DLR, a architectural firm, to conduct a feasibility study. The study, which commenced

on September 14, 2021, was completed on November 30, 2021, and delivered to the county staff. Following a thorough review of the study, the current Board of Commissioners appointed a committee to further evaluate the findings.

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City of Heppner votes to move forward with grievance against ODOT

By Andrea Di Salvo

The Heppner City Council voted to proceed with a grievance against the Oregon Dept. of Transportation and its contractor for recent curb work in Heppner at its meeting Sept. 11.

The work to redo the curbs along state highways was part of a statewide project in which the city had little or no say. While the contractor pushed back the deadline for completion several times, city councilors and staff say they are unhappy with the way things were ultimately left.

As of last Monday, the city was still waiting on the state to install flashing crosswalk signs at the intersection of Quaid and Main streets.

“Nothing has moved forward,” Interim Heppner City Manager Thomas Wolff said. “I have not signed that contract. I do not intend to sign it, pending the council’s direction to do so and pending legal counsel’s opinion.”

“At this point, it’s going to just sit there until the state moves forward,” he added.

Wolff said he was contemplating filing claims against the state’s contractor in the name of the city and listed several concerns with the work that had been done. Some areas of dissatisfaction included the replacing the red cement along Thomson Square with gray cement, the fact that the contractor tore out donated bricks and did not replace them, and a mess of red cinder rock in front of The Loop building on May and Chase streets.

“I truly feel that 24-inch strip of concrete was colored red for a reason,” said Wolff of the red concrete by Thomson Square. “It was a psychological



ODOT replaced brick with red rock. -Photo by Cindi Doherty

barrier to separate those citizens who are in the food court from those citizens on the sidewalk. When it got put back, it’s the same color clear through. There’s no psychological or other barrier whatsoever.”

The bricks Wolff referred to were donated bricks that had been inset in the sidewalk with the names of individuals, families and businesses who purchased them.

“Many of those have been torn up and discarded,” he said. “I feel they should be put back in place somewhere.”

As far as the red cinder rock, Wolff said he believed it was a cost-cutting measure on the part of the contractor when they went to replace asphalt they had torn out.

“There’s no curbing, there’s no nothing,” he said. “Cinder block just runs halfway out into that

senior bus shed, The Loop bus shed, parking lot, and in my opinion it’s just a filler.”

“We’ve got red rock scattered all over town,” Heppner Council Member Sharon Inskeep added. “It is just ridiculous.”

Heppner Public Works director Chad Doherty said the city had put concrete in the bubble-outs on Main Street but the state had told him they legally could not do that. He said many of places with cinder rock were areas that needed barriers so the visually impaired could tell when they were approaching the crosswalk.

However, he added that a couple of months ago he had requested raised, stamped concrete instead of cinder rock. He also said he believed the area put into rock was excessive.

“And I did ask on all these little, tiny spots where

they’ve just put a little bit of cinder rock in...I asked for those to be raised concrete, and they never even came back and told me no,” Doherty said.

Inskeep also raised the issue of a fire hydrant that had been hit. Doherty said he had no proof as to who backed over the hydrant, but that it should have been raised when the contractor replaced it.

“It needed to be raised,” he said. “That should be on them.”

Doherty also said that, if the city moved forward, there were other issues he had with the project that he would like included with the complaint.

Wolff reiterated his opinion that the city should place a claim against the project retainages and see what happens.

“If we do nothing, nothing’s going to happen,” he said.

The council voted unanimously to move forward with the claim against ODOT and the contractor.

Regarding the city’s water system update, Wolff said the city had met with

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Morrow County declares drought emergency



-Contributed photo

By Andrea Di Salvo

From wildfires to dusty roads to struggling crops, lack of rainfall this year has been a problem on everyone’s minds. The Morrow County Board of Commissioners made the problem official when it declared a drought emergency for Morrow County at its Sept. 6 meeting in Heppner.

Morrow County Counsel Justin Nelson pointed out that, while much of the county employs irrigation, a lot of farms are dryland operations that rely on rainfall, and those farms are suffering.

Morrow Soil and Water Conservation District Manager Kevin Payne and Oregon State University Extension Agent Larry Lutchter both supported the designation, saying they are seeing the effects of drought on the agricultural community in Morrow County.

Payne said he had been approached by concerned landowners early in the summer. As of Aug. 15, more than 90 percent of Morrow County is currently in D1, or moderate, drought. The rest of the county is either “abnormally dry” or in severe drought.

“The writing was on the wall,” Payne said. “Some neighboring counties, similar situations.”

He said Gilliam County had its declaration of emergency signed by Oregon Governor Tina Kotek Sept. 5.

“We’re kind of in that same boat,” he said. He added that Morrow County is currently a little more than two and a half inches under normal rainfall for the year.

According to a letter from Lutchter, crop-year precipitation in the county ranges from eight to 12 inches, but the average for the 2022-23 crop year was 6.6 inches. May and June, both critical for winter wheat, had only 42 and 11 percent of their overall average respectively.

Payne said that a three-month forecast into the fall and early winter showed the drought continuing. With El Nino conditions already in effect, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) forecasts a 40-50 percent probability that temperatures will be above normal, with about

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Water for Eastern Oregon (H2OEO) sets sights on clean drinking water today, solutions for the future

The coalition of businesses and community organizations that formed in 2022 to provide drinking water resources to residential well users in Morrow and Umatilla counties has formalized into “Water for Eastern Oregon (H2OEO)”, intent on bringing focus to clean water challenges and opportunities in the Basin, according to a news release.

“H2OEO is committed to continuing to connect people with clean drinking water resources and information, supporting and amplifying the efforts of state and county health agencies through collaboration with local businesses and community organizations, and following the science to find long-term groundwater

solutions in the region,” according to the release.

“The aim of H2OEO is first and foremost to make sure people have access to clean drinking water in their homes, today and into the future,” said H2OEO President Michael Graham, who is the senior director of operations, Boardman, for Tillamook County Creamery Association. “There are programs and services available in Morrow and Umatilla counties, and our membership of employers and community organizations are well-positioned to be the boots on the ground to share that information. Water quality is a crucial and complex issue, and

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