

Morrow County declares drought emergency

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the same chance that precipitation will be below normal.

"So things aren't great. If you look at the forecast... it's likely going to persist," said Payne.

Board of Commissioners Chair David Sykes's only question concerned the duration of the declaration—that is, would it last long enough? He said he didn't want farmers to get caught short if the declaration expired too early.

While the drought has certainly affected this year's crop, Morrow County Administrator Matthew Jensen pointed out that some of the current moisture readings are from ground lying fallow. Unless conditions improve drastically over the fall and winter, the lack of moisture will also affect next year's crops.

Nelson said such declarations are usually made yearly, while Payne added that the details would probably "shake out" as they went along, but the drought declaration was a good way to get the ball rolling.

"It's a good thing to cover our bases to get designated," he said, "because the USDA can then step in and, with that designation, then that kind of triggers the release of some potential programs for landowners and land managers in the county."

The county made similar drought designations in 2022, 2021, 2020 and 2018.

After a brief public hearing, the board approved the development application for a new data center on a parcel of land currently owned by Threemile Canyon Farms outside of Boardman.

Rowan Percheron, LLC submitted a development application for the project in May of this year. The company is seeking approval for a comprehensive plan amendment and zone change, along with exceptions to statewide planning goals.

Among other requirements, the 274-some acres included in the application would need to be rezoned from Exclusive Farm Use. That rezoning became a sticking point for some at previous public hearings, including a hearing held by the board of commissioners on Aug. 16.

At the close of the Aug. 16 hearing, the board agreed to leave the record open to allow time for Rowan Percheron to respond to issues raised by the Dept. of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD) and 1,000 Friends of Oregon, both of whom oppose the development.

The main concern seemed to be the rezoning of farm ground to industrial, though 1,000 Friends also mentioned concerns about infrastructure and wastewater.

The company submitted a written response to the county on Aug. 30. Among other details, Rowan Percheron pointed out that Threemile owns land that is correctly zoned industrial land but which is currently used as irrigated, producing farmland. Meanwhile, the farm-zoned land isn't being used.

"I think everything that's been presented to us shows that the land hasn't been farmed, that it isn't farmable or they would have been farming it," Morrow County Commissioner Jeff Wenholz commented after hearing a report from Morrow County Planning Director Tamra Mabbott. "So I'm prepared to move forward."

The board of commissioners voted to adopt the ordinance approving the application and direct plan-

ning department staff to work with Rowan Percheron to draft final findings.

The board also conducted the first reading of the ordinance at the meeting, with a second reading and possible adoption planned for Sept. 20.

New Circuit Court Building

The new Morrow County Circuit Court building planned for Heppner was also on the agenda again Sept. 6.

During the public comment period, Heppner resident Tim Collins presented a letter to the commissioners and said he also had a signature page he had gathered from the neighbors to the proposed site.

Collins, who owns land adjoining the proposed site, said he had talked to about 98 percent of the residents in the subdivision and about 95 percent of those had signed the page saying they didn't want the new circuit court building at that location.

Concerns cited by Collins were lack of transparency in public information, why a new circuit court building was even needed, the proximity to Heppner Elementary School and sports fields, the use of local tax dollars, and reduced parking for the county fair and rodeo.

He also said he felt the lack of transparency was even worse in light of other things the county has gone through, such as last year's recall of two commissioners.

"The new county commissioners and the mayor of Heppner are sure taking it lightly that there's no transparency and no documented decision-making process that was brought to the people openly and honestly," said Collins. "We're at the top of this process, and there's going to be things rolled out and talked about this whole thing," responded Board Chair David Sykes. "I think I told you that last time you were here."

"The details are going to come out. The public is going to be involved and made aware of it. We're going to have meetings, and the whole nine yards," Sykes added.

Later in the meeting, the board of commissioners announced the intent to award the contract for project management services for the court building to Alliance Management and Construction Solutions out of Kennewick, WA. Alliance provided a project estimate of \$290,750 based on an hourly rate.

Jensen reported that the county received four proposals for the project manager position. He added that, while Alliance had the lowest hourly rate, they also had "glowing" reports from previous contracts. They are also working on the Ione school project.

Sykes said he was in favor of the contract, especially since the county could now get "some meat on the bones" and talk through the process with the public.

"I appreciate Tim being here, because I can see his frustration...I'm glad it's a local group," said Sykes. "They understand small communities, and I really want this process to be open—the rodeo, the neighbors, anyone in the community."

Jensen said it is his plan to hold stakeholder meetings and reach out to neighbors. He also said staff members had been at the fair and rodeo assessing parking and determining the impact the new building would have.

"There's some specific issues that we have with the circuit court building

there that will impact the rodeo and fair operations," said Jensen. "But we also believe there are several options that we need to develop a little bit further before we can really address those in public meetings."

"Where this is a public building on county-owned property, it's not like we have to go set up a referendum on it, either," Jensen added. "We do want to be aware of the issues the neighbors and other people might have on it and have their input. We don't want to just railroad right through and say, 'This is how it's going to be no matter what.'"

He said his hope is to get a project manager and architect on board and have a public meeting to showcase the building design and plans.

"This is going to be the single largest visual infrastructure project that Heppner's had in decades, and we know that's going to change things for the residents," said Jensen.

Other Business

In other business, the county announced its intention to award Silver Creek Contracting the project for ditch work at the Lexington airport. The ditches are part

of the process to install more power and fiber at the county airport.

Morrow County Public Works Management Assistant Sandi Pointer told the commissioners that the county had advertised the invitation to bid for two weeks, and Silver Creek was the only company to bid.

The airport project is being funded by a Business Oregon grant. The \$296,000 grant was awarded to the county to install power and fiber infrastructure that the county hopes will spur private investment and growth at the airport in the form of aviation activities, mechanics, Unmanned Aerial System (UAS) activities and more.

"It's just taking little baby steps here and trying to develop it," said Pointer.

The project deadline is Oct. 31. Pointer said the project should go smoothly, since Silver Creek is already working on the Taxiway D project at the airport and will hopefully be able to transition straight into digging ditches.

The board approved the contract and gave chair Sykes the authority to sign after the seven-day protest period.

Morrow County Fair Secretary Sue Gibbs gave an overview of the 2023 fair and rodeo and reported 4,500 people came through the gates. The fair had 181 4-H and FFA exhibitors and 184 open class exhibitors for a total of 1,360 entries. Dairy entries were at an all-time high at 22 animals.

Gibbs said 134 animals were sold at the auction, which brought in well over \$650,000, also an all-time high. More than \$109,000 was raised for community projects.

"It was a good fair and rodeo. We heard a lot of great comments," said Gibbs, adding that she learned a lot her first year running the event. "I hope that next year things will go even smoother."

The commissioners complimented Gibbs on stepping in during the middle of fair preparations. Gibbs started as fair secretary earlier this summer.

She also told the commissioners that Butch Knowles Day was announced at the rodeo, and that Knowles appeared very honored. The board had voted to establish Butch Knowles Day in Morrow County at its Aug. 16 meeting.

Morrow County Undersheriff Brian Snyder reported that Morrow County Sheriff's Office is short-handed on the patrol side of things, and will be losing another couple of people, which will make them even more understaffed. He said those leaving MCSO are generally staying in the area but moving to higher-paying jobs.

At the same time, he said Gina Williams had been promoted to parole and probation and is "hitting the ground running." The department is also waiting for dispatch equipment to arrive so it can get the fourth dispatch station up and running.

Morrow County Clerk Bobbi Childers told the board of commissioners of Senate Bill 11, which will require boards or commissions that conduct public meetings electronically to record and promptly publish them on a website so the public can watch or listen to them free of charge.

The bill was signed into law in July and will go into effect Jan. 1 of 2024. Executive sessions are exempted.

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