

# Morrow County Health District to discontinue ambulance services

By Chris Sykes

Years-long debates, lawsuits, and mistrust have plagued the Morrow County Health District (MCHD) Boardman Fire Rescue District (BFRD) and Morrow County regarding the discontinuation of ambulance services. On December 13, 2023, MCHD issued a 90-day notice to cease ambulance services in Morrow County, citing ongoing safety concerns and a failure to reach an agreement with the county. MCHD claims that despite their attempts to engage in good faith discussions, their concerns, and questions regarding the proposed Ambulance Service Area (ASA) Plan and Ordinance have not been adequately addressed.

The discontinuation of ambulance service in Morrow County raises significant concerns about the provision of emergency medical care for both residents and visitors. It remains unclear whether an agreement can be reached within 90 days or if Morrow County will need to decide on alternative coverage. Both the MCHD and Morrow County express their commitment to the safety of the community, but they hold differing views on the proposed ASA Plan and Ordinance.

According to the County, they have engaged with Morrow County Health District and Boardman Fire Rescue District (BFRD) on a draft Ambulance Service Area Plan (ASA) to achieve these goals. These groups have provided input and comments on the draft, most of which were included or adapted into the document. While this input was valuable, it is still the County's ultimate responsibility to prepare the Ambulance Service Area Plan for the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) to review. On December 11, 2023, a draft was submitted for initial review by OHA, and the County is in the process of providing additional documents before OHA moves forward with its review. This was not a final document as it still needs to go through public notice, consideration, and adoption by the Board of Commissioners. The County was surprised by the 90-day notice and had expected to continue its partnership with MCHD for ambulance services. According to the county, consistent communication between the County, MCHD, and BFRD had been taking place before this development.

In a press release, he MCHD has raised several concerns regarding the

proposed changes. They have worries about reduced cross-coverage in Boardman and Irrigon, the composition of the new EMS Advisory Committee, the lack of a process for investigating medical issues, and the inadequate addressing of confidentiality concerns in the proposed ASA Plan and Ordinance. Talking with Emily Roberts, the CEO, she expressed her dissatisfaction with the county's communication practices, stating that they were neither clear nor adequate. She was particularly curious about the methods and reasoning behind certain conclusions they had reached.

In response to the notice from the Morrow County Health Department (MCHD) Morrow County's County Administrator, Matt Jensen, emphasized two key objectives in their press release. Firstly, they aim to reaffirm that, in accordance with Oregon law, the County holds the direct responsibility for establishing ambulance services. This assertion is meant to clarify any misconceptions and ensure adherence to the legal framework.

Secondly, the County intends to establish an independent Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Advisory Committee. This

committee will serve as an overseeing body, responsible for evaluating the practices of all ambulance service providers within the County. By doing so, the County aims to ensure transparency in the evaluation of ambulance services and guarantee the highest standards of quality in emergency medical care.

Here are some of MCHD concerns and Morrow County's response to those concerns according to their press releases and interviews.

### What MCHD says:

The current draft indicates that Boardman Fire Rescue District has been awarded the "Northern Ambulance Service Area" in Morrow County. However, the county has not followed the established processes outlined in the 1998 ASA Plan or the 2022 ASA Plan to replace MCHD as the ambulance service provider in any part of Morrow County. The rationale for changing the ambulance service provider in the Boardman area has also not been provided by Morrow County.

### The County's response:

MCHD nor BFRD are listed as initial providers. The ASA is crafted to allow up to three providers (if practical) to operate in the County with initial provid-

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# City of Ione ensures safe water supply

By Annalynn Black

On December 12, 2023, test results revealed the presence of coliform and E. coli in certain areas of the city's water system. The city well and reservoir were unaffected, but the booster station on Emert and the Ione City Hall tested positive for these contaminants. This necessitated a comprehensive response from the city authorities.

City staff, including Scott Ezell, an Automation Engineer from the Port of Morrow, met with Bill Goss from the Oregon Public Drinking Water Service to discuss progress and devise additional steps to eliminate the contamination. The city swiftly repaired and put the Chlorination Station into operation to initiate the chlorination process systematically. This involved moving chlorinated water through the main water lines while requesting residents to flush water in their homes and businesses to facilitate the flow in the entire system.

To ensure the distribution of safe water throughout the system, Public Works Director Shad Hass flushed hydrants and conducted chlorine level tests

on December 14<sup>th</sup>. Following state policy, he hand-delivered water samples to the Umpqua Research Company, a water testing laboratory in Pendleton. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, the test results came back negative, confirming the successful eradication of contaminants. Subsequently, Bill Goss lifted the boil ban, granting residents the freedom to use the water without restrictions. Furthermore, the city performed another round of testing on the 19<sup>th</sup>, with results expected soon.

Recognizing the need to fortify their infrastructure against potential future issues, the City of Ione is collaborating with the city of Heppner to develop an inter-agency contract. This partnership will enhance their collective readiness to deal with any future water-related challenges effectively. Additionally, the city has organized a town meeting scheduled for January 9<sup>th</sup> at the Legion Hall in Ione. This meeting aims to engage residents, provide updates on the issue, and gather feedback and suggestions to ensure proactive and comprehensive measures for any future potential problems.

# Santa visits Sage Garden Preschool



Sage Garden Preschoolers posing with Santa before they leave for the holidays. - Contributed Photo

On the last day of school before the new year, Santa Claus visited Sage Garden Preschool, delighting all the children. Dressed in a cheerful red suit, Santa (also known as Will Lem-

mon) spread holiday cheer as he posed for pictures with the kids. The parents added to the festive atmosphere by bringing snacks and crafts for the children to enjoy.

# Christmas Eve at Heppner Christian Church

Heppner Christian Church is having a Candlelight Christmas Eve service

at 5:00pm on Sunday the 24th located at 293 Gale St, Heppner, all are welcome.

# Christmas Eve at Hopeful Saint Ministry

Hopeful Saints Ministry invites you to join us for our Christmas Eve service beginning at 10 AM on Sunday, December 24th. Worship will be a traditional Christmas Eve candle-

light service with lessons, carols, and communion. Located at 420 Gale St, in Heppner Oregon, gather up your family and friends to share this sacred time together.

# Local woman goes to Spain to write



Marissa Occhiuto on a hike posing in front of the Castel De Llaers. - Contributed Photo

By Annalynn Black

Marissa Occhiuto, a dedicated graduate of PSU with a bachelor's degree in art history, recently embarked on an extraordinary journey that would forever change her life. Through sheer determination and a leap of faith, Marissa found herself participating in the renowned Wayward Worm Hole writing workshop. This opportunity held immense significance for her, as she had only attended one formal in-person writing class prior to this transformative experience.

Originally from the captivating Willamette Valley, Marissa and her husband made a bold decision to relocate to Heppner last year, enticed by promising job prospects. Little did she know that this move would

open doors to a remarkable opportunity for personal and artistic growth.

The Wayward Worm Hole workshop caught Marissa's attention through a social media post shared by one of her favorite authors. Although she initially felt hesitant, she decided to throw caution to the wind and applied for the workshop, thinking, "Might as well?" The application process entailed submitting a Science-Fiction and Fantasy short story, allowing the organizers to assess her writing style and abilities. Out of the multitude of applications received, only twelve exceptionally talented individuals were chosen to participate in this exclusive workshop.

Marissa's passion for Fantasy and science fiction

had been nurtured since her childhood, but it was during the challenging times brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic that she truly began to take her craft seriously. Determined to share her stories with the world, she started submitting her works to various publishers and magazines, enjoying notable success with a few of her pieces being sold. Enrolling in the workshop at the picturesque Castel De Llaers, nestled two hours north of Barcelona, became the next pivotal step in Marissa's artistic journey.

Embarking on international travel after nearly a decade naturally stirred some apprehension within Marissa. However, her fears were swiftly dispelled by the warm camaraderie of her fellow workshop attendees. The route to Spain proved challenging, involving bus and train rides due to ongoing road construction. Nevertheless, language barriers were skillfully surmounted with the assistance of bilingual members, ensuring a safe and triumphant arrival.

Although Marissa didn't have the opportunity to explore the nearby attractions due to the workshop's secluded location, the breathtaking view from the castle compensated for any missed adventures. The sight of the French Pyrenees in the distance provided Marissa with a wellspring of inspiration, infusing her writing with the beauty of the natural surroundings.

She managed to carve out time for invigorating hikes around the castle, capturing stunning photographs that showcased the union of historical architecture and majestic mountains.

While the culinary experience during her stay leaned towards an American diet to accommodate the diverse group, Marissa eagerly embraced the chance to savor Spain's renowned dried meats. Venturing to a nearby hostel, she indulged in an authentic culinary experience, bravely sampling dishes that included goose, lamb, and blood sausages. Although the latter was not her personal favorite, she wholeheartedly embraced her adventurous spirit, allowing her taste buds to journey into uncharted territory.

Upon reflection, Marissa humbly acknowledges her limitations as an indi-

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