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## BOC hears ambulance service update

*Commissioners field public outcry regarding feared suspension of services*



Community members and MCHD employees gather in Irrigon voice their concerns about the ambulance service agreement. - Contributed Photo

By Andrea Di Salvo

The debate regarding ambulance services in Morrow County has heated up again just in time for the new year.

It was standing room only at the Morrow County Board of Commissioners Dec. 20 meeting in Irrigon, along with 40 online participants, when the three commissioners heard an update on a proposed new Ambulance Service Area (ASA) plan, as well as emotional pleas from the community regarding continuation of ambulance services in the county.

For a couple of years now, ambulance services in Morrow County have been the center of debate, lawsuits and a large dose of mistrust.

The original source of contention was Boardman Fire Rescue District's (BFRD) desire to offer ambulance services in Boardman, as well as the new board of commissioners' decision to reexamine the county's ASA plan as a result of that request.

That decision was met with backlash from the Morrow County Health District (MCHD), which has been the county's sole ambulance service provider for several decades.

After several months of silence, the renewed controversy stems from the county's submission of a draft ASA plan to the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) on Dec. 11.

Hard on the heels of that submission came the Morrow County Health District's Dec. 13 announcement that it plans to discontinue ambulance services within 90 days, a move that has many in Morrow County in a state of panic concerning their own health care.

In documents posted on its website, MCHD cited "serious ongoing safety issues," as well as "substantial economic loss," as major reasons for its decision.

"Since September, we have attempted to engage the County in good faith efforts to quickly resolve the ambulance service dispute," MCHD wrote in statement. "Resolving this issue is urgent due to serious ongoing safety issues."

"We want to continue to be the ambulance service provider for all of Morrow County. In order to do that, we need a service contract, ambulance service area plan and ordinance that are mutually agreeable to the county and the district,"

said MCHD CEO Emily Roberts at the Dec. 20 meeting.

"We want to emphasize that there is still a lot of work to be done in the next 90 days if the county and the district are to resolve this issue."

"Although this was an extremely difficult decision, the board stands behind the decision," added MCHD Board Chair Diane Kilkenny.

"Oregon state statutes are very clear in that the county bears sole responsibility to ensure ambulance service is available throughout Morrow County," said BFRD Chief Michael Hughes in his own comment at the meeting. "I just want to let all of you know that Boardman Fire is here to assist our community, as well as the county, in any way so that ambulance services are maintained."

### Public Outcry

The 23 public comments at the beginning of the BOC meeting lasted more than 45 minutes and ranged from emotional pleas to save ambulance services to accusations that the commissioners were letting their egos get in the way.

Several Irrigon residents at the meeting said they felt they weren't being represented at the county level and that they believed Irrigon would lose all ambulance services if the proposed ASA plan moves forward.

"I've performed a lot of funerals for people in this community. There's a lot of people that need assistance," said Pastor Rick Yardley of Columbia View Community Church in Irrigon. "I was flabbergasted when I heard there might be a possibility of our ambulance service going away."

Several speakers also pointed to the recent passage of the MCHD bond as proof that county residents side with the health district. Others, such as South Morrow resident John Kilkenny, said they were unhappy with a clause that would allow the county to seize assets from an ASA provider.

"That provision alone disqualifies this from going forward," said Kilkenny. "I'm not even sure how such language as that could get in there."

"I think we've got the cart before the horse," said Irrigon City Manager Aaron Palmquist, a former MCHD board member. "Put the brakes on and do some public hearings for trans-

parency and get input from all communities."

"I think the lack of transparency, the lack of providing a plan of how we are going to be taken care of in our city, is unconscionable," said Bobbi Veach of Irrigon. "I am just livid that this could even be an idea that you're considering."

Tom Roberts, Interim Chief of the Irrigon Rural Fire Protection District, said he did not envy the commissioners their position, but that Irrigon Fire also felt caught in the middle.

"Irrigon Fire Department stands in a position where we're caught between two entities that we work with closely. We have a great relationship with both of them, so it saddens us that we feel this tug in both directions," he said.

Roberts also said that sometimes the existing services in North Morrow were overrun with calls. He said the fire district wanted to see MCHD's role as ambulance provider continue, but also admitted he recognized Boardman's right to decide how it wanted to operate. That said, he stressed that the other communities should have that same right.

"I think that there needs to be some form of a resolution that brings everybody together because I think that we're going to find that we need *all* of the emergency medical services that are being provided, not just one or the other," he said. "But I hear very loudly from the people that I represent here in this district that they do not want to be excluded from the conversation."

### ASA Plan Update

All of the comments came before the ASA plan update from Morrow County Administrator Matthew Jensen, who said he felt many of the concerns would be addressed in his presentation.

"This is not something to go in lightly, nor allow personal egos to get in the way," Jensen said in response to the public comments.

At the same time, he stated several times that the proposed ASA did not dismantle the current provider, but simply allowed the county to administer the plan better.

"We're looking at the organizational structure for managing ambulance services, which is statutorily in these three seats," Jensen told the commissioners. "You have the requirement to do that as the county executive and legislative body."

Jensen began his presentation to the board by reminding those present that the county is statutorily responsible to manage ambulance services, but that that management had been handed over to Morrow County Health District since at least 1998.

"I'm quite sure it was done with the best of interests and the best intentions,"

Jensen said. "However, it has removed that statutory responsibility from the county," he said. "I'm all for democratic measure, but we are a republican government, and that means that you have been elected to make some of these tough decisions."

He also said that the draft plan submitted to OHA does not denote who the ambulance service area providers are.

"No area service plan should, because it provides the statutory framework in which the county can assess, look at the options, and then make the best decision for the residents and the visitors of the county," he said. "No provider has been established through the ASA, specifically because the ASA will not christen someone to continue in service indefinitely."

Jensen said the county has been using the previous ASA as a template but that the draft includes some updates and changes. He added that about 90 percent of the language is the same as in the current ASA, including the right of the county to seize property if a provider vacates an area.

"That's all language that's in the 1998 and the proposed 2022 [ASA]. It's in there," he said, adding that, with MCHD administering the plan, it created a loop that would not allow the county to ensure continued services if the health district decided to pull out.

The new draft plan includes several key changes; for instance, it seeks to re-establish the county as the authority over the ASA plan and establishes an independent Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Advisory Committee to review the services and provide recommendations to the Board of Commissioners.

Jensen said the change to the EMS Advisory Committee would mean it dealt less with quality assurance and individual cases and provided more of a "10,000-foot view" making sure the providers are performing their duties correctly.

Historically, the EMS Advisory Committee members have been appointed by the MCHD board, with a heavy representation of

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## Heppner GT closed on New Year's Day

The Heppner Gazette Times will be closed on Monday the 1<sup>st</sup> for New Year's Day. Years, we will resume our regular hours on the 2<sup>nd</sup>

## Lucky jeep winner



Charlie Ross was the winner of the highly anticipated Pepsi Drawing for the remote-control kids Jeep at Heppner Family Foods. This exciting raffle has been ongoing since October. -Contributed Photo

## Boardman's city motto winners



(L-R) Mayor Keefer, Mikayla Mickles, Hadley Coleman, Seth Hammond, Noah Reaves

At their December meeting, the City Council announced the four finalists in the City Motto Contest. In an effort to promote community interest in activities happening in the city, the Council chose to ask for involvement in creating a new motto that will aid in a new logo. A total of 70 submissions and 47 participants were collected. Each winner was awarded prizes from various businesses around town. The Community winner - Noah

Reaves - "Where potential comes to grow" • Riverside Jr/Sr High winner - Seth Hammond - "Beauty around the bend" • Windy River winner - Mikayla Mickles - "Where river meets opportunity" • Sam Boardman Winner - Hadley Coleman - "Small town, big dreams"

The City Manager will be working with the finalists to compile additional ideas for the public to vote on in the coming months.

## Heppner weather forecast Dec 28th - Jan 3rd

The lows will be in the upper 20's, while the highs will reach the mid to low 40's. With a chance of rain on Saturday. However, next week, temperatures are expected to warm

up slightly. Throughout the week, there will be patchy rain and partly cloudy conditions. New Year's Day: It will be mostly cloudy, with a high near 40 degrees.

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