



the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

50¢



VOL. 144 NO. 2 8 Pages Wednesday, January 10, 2024 Morrow County, Heppner, Oregon

Sykes reappointed BOC chair

Commissioners continue to take beating over ASA, circuit court building

By Andrea Di Salvo

The Morrow County Board of Commissioners reappointed Morrow County Commissioner David Sykes as the board chair at its Jan. 3 meeting in Heppner.

The position of board chair had previously rotated among the three positions, but the current commissioners chose to switch to a yearly election when they took office last year.

Morrow County Commissioner Jeff Wenzholz was elected vice chair.

No controversy surrounded the election of officers at the meeting, but tension was definitely in the air at the first Board of Commissioners meeting of the year.

While neither the crowd nor the comments were as numerous as at the Dec. 20 meeting in Irrigon, the commissioners still fielded criticism on the county's Ambulance Service Area (ASA) plan and the new circuit court building, as well as threats of a recall.

Morrow County Health District CEO Emily Roberts opened the public comments by telling the commissioners that the current ASA creation process was not following the process laid out in the 1998 ASA plan.

John Kilkenny of Heppner said the health district has been providing great service for decades and he saw no reason to change providers based on that performance.

He also reiterated com-

ments from the Dec. 20 meeting, saying that he objected to ASA wording about the county being able to seize the assets of a provider.

At the last BOC meeting, Morrow County Administrator Matt Jensen had said publicly that the wording had been in the 1998 plan and had not changed. Kilkenny argued that the language had changed "significantly" and that the 1998 plan had stated the health district would retain those assets.

"A million and a half dollars of assets are to be retained by the Morrow County Health District. The new language says that those assets are to be seized by Morrow County," said Kilkenny. "That's just totally unacceptable language. No business, no ranch, no other public entity would enter into a contract with anyone in which their assets are seized."

During a presentation to the Heppner City Council Monday night, Jensen again said the wording had not changed, but that the problems in interpretation came from the fact that Morrow County would replace MCHD as the ASA administrator in the new plan.

Due to the concerns over the wording of that section, however, Jensen told the Heppner City Council that the wording had been removed completely from the draft ASA plan.

Meanwhile, Tim Collins of Heppner was at the

BOC meeting last week to voice continued concerns about the proposed site of the new Morrow County Circuit Court building.

"I have many concerns and questions about what is going on in Morrow County with our local government and the silence from our government related to what's going on with the new circuit courthouse that is going to be built in Heppner," Collins said. "I am requesting that the county have open public meetings to inform residents of the county about the specifics of this project."

Collins also requested that the budget for the project be made public and submitted a petition that he said included signatures of 87 registered voters whom he said wanted to change the location of the building.

While rumors of another recall have been circulating for several months, Irrigon resident Stuart Dick laid the issue on the table when he accused the commissioners of not listening to constituents but, rather, doing whatever they want to do.

"Nobody in this room or this county wants to go through another recall. It was a horrible experience," said Dick, adding that the recall of previous commissioners Melissa Lindsay and Jim Doherty was "orchestrated" and "done behind closed doors."

"You have a preconceived agenda, so I'm going to be up-front with you. We're going to initiate a

recall," he said.

Dick also accused Jensen of deliberately taking action he knew would shut down dialogue.

"And then you called it a miscommunication," he said. "It's not a miscommunication. It's deliberate. We're not stupid."

ASA Update

True to his word at the last BOC meeting, Jensen also provided an update on the ASA plan at the meeting. While much of the presentation went over old ground, he did attempt to clarify some of what he said in his previous report.

Jensen spent much of his time reiterating that the county is overhauling the ASA because Oregon Revised Statutes state that the county is responsible for administering the ASA. However, he said, there is an inherent conflict of interests in current ASAs, which contain an "abdication of control" by the county to allow the Morrow County Health District to administer the program.

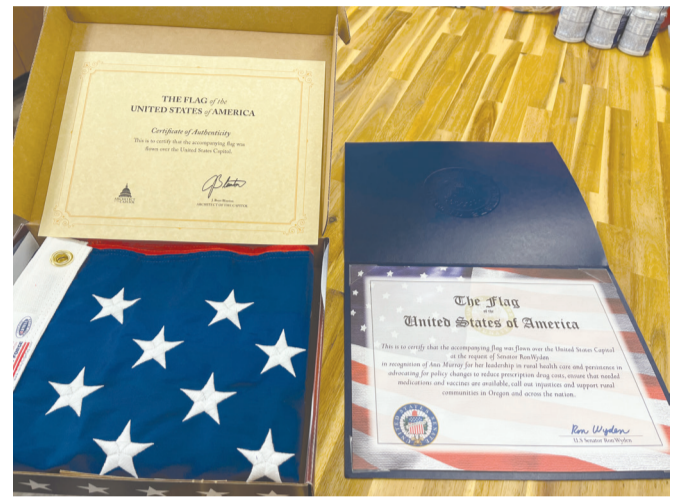
"While this has operated quite well, and Morrow County Health District has taken care of business, there come conflicts when there are providers that want to present and take a look at providing additional services," he said. "And there becomes a conflict of interests when your EMS advisory committee, which is in charge of reviewing that, is largely made up of MCHD—another provid-

-Continued to PAGE SIX

Wyden awards Murray



Sen Wyden presenting and awarding Ann Murray at the Boardman Town Hall. - Contributed Photo



The official American Flag awarded to Ann Murray. - Contributed Photo

On January 4th, at Boardman High School, Senator Wyden presented a well-deserved award to Ann Murray during a town hall meeting he was hosting. Ann was honored for her remarkable contributions to the field of Pharmacy. The highlight of this recogni-

tion was Senator Wyden presenting Ann with an official American Flag, which had been proudly flown over the capital. To authenticate this symbolic gesture, Senator Wyden provided Ann with the necessary documentation.

Morrow County vows to maintain ambulance service despite pending agreement standoff

Morrow County - On January 5th, Morrow County released a new statement regarding the ASA plan and its ongoing feud with the Morrow County Health District.

"On December 13, 2023, Morrow County received from Morrow County Health District (MCHD) a notice that it will discontinue ambulance services effective midnight on March 12, 2024. MCHD also provided notice that it would no longer engage in the process of development of the new Ambulance Service Area Plan and Ordi-

nance. MCHD has advised the County that it was required to give notice since the proposed language for the ASA Plan includes language from the 1998 Plan and repeated in the 2023 ASA Plan proposed by MCHD, that requires an ambulance service provider vacating its area to turnover their ambulances(s) and equipment for use by the recruited interim personnel until a replacement service can be established. MCHD vigorously objects to this provision. Accordingly,

-Continued to PAGE SEVEN

MCPD addresses the water crisis

By Annalynn Black

The Lower Umatilla Basin is currently facing a drinking water crisis, and the Morrow County Planning Department has taken on the responsibility to address this pressing issue. Joining forces with Umatilla County, Morrow County sought assistance from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to secure funding for tackling the problem. On October 10th, 2023, their efforts paid off as the EPA granted a substantial sum of \$1.7 million to aid in the identification of contaminated wells within the LUB and the development of both public and private solutions to ensure clean drinking water supply.

A longstanding concern in the Lower Umatilla Basin, nitrate concentrations in the groundwater have been exceeding federal standards since 1990, prompting the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to designate the area as a groundwater management area or LUBGWMA. As part of the declaration the DEQ identified five significant sources of nitrate contamination. These sources include irrigated agriculture, onsite septic systems, land application of wastewater,

confined animal feedlots (CAFOs), and pollution from the washout lagoon at the Umatilla Army Depot.

Encompassing approximately 562 square miles in northern Morrow and western Umatilla counties, the LUBGWMA includes significant towns such as Hermiston, Stanfield, Echo, Umatilla, Boardman and Irrigon. Within this region, around 3,300 active domestic wells provide drinking water to rural households. However, about half of this region is under cultivation allowing water infiltration due to the shallow alluvial soil, water infiltration carries high nitrate concentrations, which pose significant contamination risks, as reported by the Morrow and Umatilla County Drinking Water Investigation (MUCDWI).

With the primary drinking water standard for nitrate concentration set at 10 milligrams per liter (mg/L), recent testing of over 600 domestic wells has revealed alarming concentrations exceeding this threshold in a substantial number of wells, with some even exceeding 50 mg/L. Recognizing the severity of the situation, the Oregon Health Authority has conducted testing on more than 1,600 groundwa-

ter wells in both counties as of November 10th, 2023.

Elevated nitrate levels in drinking water can have severe health implications, such as causing methemoglobinemia or "blue baby syndrome" in infants, increasing the risk of thyroid disorders and gastric and bladder cancers in adults, and heightening the chances of miscarriage, birth defects, and low birth weight. Infants under six months of age are especially vulnerable if they consume formula mixed with nitrate-rich water. Additionally, high nitrate concentration in groundwater can contribute to algal blooms in surface water, leading to higher levels of disinfection by-products in treated and potable water. These disinfection by-products pose a range of health risks, including cancer, reproductive health issues, liver and kidney problems, and central nervous system disorders.

According to the Morrow and Umatilla County Drinking Water Investigation (MUCDWI),

The overarching objective of this project is to determine the spatial extent of nitrate contamination and identify sufficient options for connecting affected areas to public or community

water systems. The data collected throughout the project will be integrated into a comprehensive database and Geographic Information System (GIS) to enable ongoing monitoring, analysis, and preliminary planning-level engineering assessments for impacted well owners. To achieve this, additional well sampling will be conducted, with a strong emphasis on outreach efforts to domestic well users.

An essential aspect of the project is community education. Domestic well users and the wider community will be informed about the regional

-Continued to PAGE TWO

MCSOs new Parole and Probation Officer



After dedicating five years of service as a dispatcher at the MCSO (Morrow County Sheriff's Office), Communications Deputy Acosta Garcia has transitioned into a new role as a Parole and Probation Officer within the organization. -Contributed Photo

POLARIS
UPGRADE YOUR RIDE

ELEVATE YOUR ADVENTURE

NEW 2023 MODELS

CHECK OUT THE NEW 2023 POLARIS LINEUP. CONTACT US TO RESERVE YOUR RIDE TODAY.

Morrow County Grain Growers Inc.

CALL
541-989-8221
ext 204
for more information

WARNING: Polaris' off-road vehicles can be hazardous to operate and are not intended for on-road use. Driver must be at least 18 years old with a valid driver's license to operate. Passengers, if permitted, must be at least 12 years old. All riders should always wear helmets, eye protection, and protective clothing. Always use seat belts and roll-over protective structures (ROPS) when operating. Never engage in stunt driving, and avoid excessive speeds and sharp turns. Riding and alcohol/drugs don't mix. All riders should take a safety training course. Call 800-541-0766 for additional information. Check local laws before riding on trails. ©2022 Polaris Inc.

POLARIS | OFF ROAD