



# the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

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## Wenholz, Doherty under scrutiny by ethics commission

By Andrea Di Salvo

Both Morrow County Commissioner Jeff Wenholz and former commissioner Jim Doherty have come under scrutiny from the Oregon Government Ethics Commission (OGEC) after complaints regarding misuse of public office and conflicts of interest. After hearing the results of preliminary reviews, the ethics commission voted unanimously to move forward with formal investigation in both cases.

### Wenholz faced with conflict-of-interest complaint

The complaint against Wenholz regarded a cross-over between the county commissioner's role in government and his position on the Umatilla Electric Cooperative (UEC) board.

Wenholz is the vice president of the UEC board of directors. According to the UEC website, he has been a board member since 2004. While UEC is a member-owned not-for-profit, it does sell electric services in Umatilla, Union and Morrow counties.

In the cooperative's 2021 and 2022 revenue reports, Wenholz is listed as a paid officer, receiving just over \$10,000 in compensation each of those years.

The ethics complaint alleged that Wenholz used his position as a commissioner to financially benefit Umatilla Electric Cooperative.

In her preliminary report at the commission's January meeting, investigator Hillary Murrieta told the ethics commission that, even if accepting Wenholz's



Jeff Wenholz

argument that UEC is a nonprofit and not a business, an exception would not apply because he received compensation in his role as an officer.

Additionally, any decision made by the board of commissioners that could financially benefit Umatilla Electric should be viewed as a conflict of interests, she said.

For instance, in the county's letter of support for the Sunstone Solar project in Morrow County, the investigator said Wenholz should have publicly announced a conflict of interests because the solar project would be using UEC's transmission lines. He apparently did not announce the conflict.

Murrieta said an agreement with the Wheatridge energy facility was less clear-cut but would be investigated if the commission decided to move forward.

Wenholz was not present at the meeting, but his attorney, Richard Lee, was present on his behalf.

Lee said the action taken in the Feb. 8, 2023, meeting was an amendment to an existing agreement with Wheatridge East. The

amendment changed the capacity of the project in Morrow County but not the overall capacity, Lee said, and so had no impact on the project's contract with UEC.

"It was a transfer from one county to another," said Lee.

Lee's second point of emphasis was over the June 21, 2023, meeting, at which the commissioners approved a letter of support for Sunstone Solar to the Energy Facility Siting Council.

Lee pointed out that Morrow County had entered into the agreement with Sunstone before Wenholz was on the board of commissioners.

"A letter that simply says, 'We support the existing contract already entered into and also support your job,'" Lee said, saying that there was no potential impact for UEC.

At the Sept. 20, 2023 meeting, the Morrow County Board of Commissioners approved a comment letter to the siting council regarding Sunstone Solar. Lee said the siting council had requested the comments.

"The actions then are specific comments on specific components of Sunstone Solar's project," said Lee. "There's no basis to conclude that any of those specific comments...has any potential impact on UEC."

Murrieta said those details didn't change her recommendation, because there were still things she felt needed to be confirmed through investigation.

"I think I need some

more information to look into that," she said.

OGEC Chair Shawn Lindsay said that, while he did not expect any "material outcomes" from the investigation, he agreed that it needed to move forward.

"I think we need to iron out some of the facts," he said.

### Doherty under scrutiny for COVID funds

The complaint against Doherty alleged that in late 2020, while Doherty was serving as county commissioner, he may have used his position to make decisions regarding COVID-related grant disbursements in a way that benefitted his own family's businesses.

Doherty and his wife own a cattle company, while his son owns an outfitters service. Because businesses owned by Doherty and



JIM DOHERTY

his son were among the applicants for the funds, investigator Susan Meyers said, Doherty was faced with a conflict of interests.

Meyers said Doherty had apparently participated in four meetings in December of 2020 in which the board of commissioners

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## HHS Championship signs shining bright!



Will and William Allred posing in front of the new sign, across from the fairgrounds.

-Photo by Greg Grant

Heppner High School state championship commemorative signs have been completed and installed according to HHS Athletic Director Greg Grant. "They turned out better than we could have imagined". "This project had so many people contribute to make this happen. This is one more example of the tremendous support we receive at HHS from our community".

The project started when the old sign started to deteriorate and needed repainted and recent accomplishments added. The original sign was erected in 1992 in a project spearheaded by the late Kenny Turner. "I had the old sign

removed and was hoping to get it repainted, but after looking at it- we needed to add space for future accomplishments and the new design came about". Jim Kindle and Shawn Gibbs helped by connecting us with the metal shop at Two Rivers Correctional Institute in Umatilla. "None of this would have been possible without their expertise and hard work. They were tremendously helpful in every aspect of the project. The signs are a direct result of their work.

Jim and Shawn arranged to have Principal Ryan Gerry, Greg Grant, and students David Cribbs and Tucker Ashbeck tour TRCI and meet all the people responsible for designing, fabricating, and painting the sign. "We all came back very impressed with their skill and professionalism". The signs were transported to Heppner by Jim Kindle. The signs came complete with detailed instructions on how to assemble them and put them up.

In September Will Allred of Allred Land Works agreed to take on

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## Heppner '23 All Stars

The 2023 Heppner High School football season all-stars

first-team defense, Cameron Proudfoot, SR.

Second team offense, Caden George, JR. Jamie Cavan, JR.

Second-team defense, Caden George, JR.

Third-team offense, Mason Orem, JR.

Third-team defense, Nick Wenberg, JR.

## Hoop Shoot winners



(L-R) Tenley Rosenbalm, Cooper Stefani, Colden Hoeft, Sonny Matheny, Berkley Hanna and Lilian Kenny.

- Contributed Photo

Six local kids earned the chance to participate in The Elks East District Hoop Shoot contest that was held on January 7, 2024, in John Day. The East District consists of Condon, Heppner, Milton-Freewater, Enterprise, Baker, John Day, Burns, Bend, Madras, Prineville, and Ontario Lodges and each lodge has an opportunity to send 1 participant from each of the 6 age groups. Sonny Matheny and Berkley Hanna received first place in their age groups, 8-9 boys & and 8-9 girls, and advanced to the State Elks Hoop Shoot contest in Silverton, Oregon on February 10, 2024. The compe-

tion is in the same format at each level. Participants shoot 10 free throws then 15 free throws for a total of 25. State first-place winners advance to the regional contest in March 2024 in Kennewick, Washington. These kids will shoot free throws against winners from the Elks Area 8 states of Alaska, Washington, and Idaho. Regional winners will then compete at the national level in Chicago in April. Lilian Kenny placed seventh for the 10-11 girls, Colden Hoeft placed fifth for the 10-11 boys, Tenley Rosenbalm placed second for the 12-13 girls and Cooper Stefani placed fifth for the 12-13 boys.

## Heppner council passes cat ordinance

The discussion of the MC ambulance service continues

By Andrea Di Salvo

The Heppner City Council unanimously passed a new cat ordinance at its Jan. 8 meeting. The ordinance prohibits the feeding of feral and unowned cats and limits cat ownership to six per household.

The vote was preceded by a public comment period, but no comments were submitted.

The ordinance was one item in a long agenda last week. The meeting began with the swearing-in of new Heppner Councilor Ralph Klock. The council appointed Klock to replace JoAnna Lamb, who resigned from the council in December.

The council also heard the annual audit report from Richard Stoddard of the accounting firm Barnett & Moro. Stoddard gave the city a clean audit report with only a few notes. An ongoing weakness is a lack of checks and balances in Heppner's accounting system, a weakness likely to continue due to the city's lack of staff.

While there was no comment on the cat ordinance, the council did hear from upset Heppner resident Brandi Hanson during the public comment period. She urged the council not

to issue a permit for the proposed new circuit court building.

The proposed site is on county property near the Morrow County Fairgrounds and is also near Heppner Elementary School. The selected site has been a source of anger among many Heppner residents.

Hanson said she believed the city council is the protector of the city and its traditions, and she believed the new circuit court building would directly threaten those if built where it is currently proposed.

Among other objections, Hanson said the courthouse would take over the entire overflow parking for the rodeo, as well as affecting neighbors.

"Our rodeo has been here for 100-plus years," she said. "An entire neighborhood is going to be disrupted and reconstructed."

Hanson believed Heppner would likely lose the fair and rodeo, which would have an economic and cultural impact on the town.

"I brought my daughter back to live the traditions we have in this town, and a lot of them have up and left because we don't have

enough people keeping them up," Hanson said. "We don't want things such as traditions being ruined by 25-million-dollar-plus courthouses.

"We really hope as the protectors of this city, that you hear us when we say, 'We don't want change. We didn't ask for it, and we know it's hard, but we don't want it,'" she told the council.

### ASA Plan Update

The council also heard an update on another controversial subject, Morrow County's new Ambulance Service Area (ASA) plan. Morrow County Administrator Matthew Jensen was on hand at the meeting to give a progress report and take questions from council members.

As he has stated at several Board of Commissioners meetings, Jensen stressed that the new plan does not name providers but is meant to put control of the plan back in the hands of the county.

He told the council that he is in the process of looking at other Oregon county ASAs. Out of the 25 he has looked at so far, he said Morrow County is the only one that does not have the Emergency Medi-

cal Services/ASA advisory committee report directly to the county. Instead, the Morrow County Health District has been administering the plan since at least 1998.

"We're a bit of an aberration," he said.

He said that having a provider like MCHD manage services creates an inherent conflict of interest with issues such as the appointment of the advisory committee, determination of providers, and performance review.

Jensen said the county

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