



# the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

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## Wrapping up the commissioner recall meetings

By Chris Sykes

Another contentious recall meeting was held in Irrigon, this time with the presence of County Commissioner Roy Drago and Lisa Pratt, Board Chair of Boardman Fire, who were new faces at the meeting.

### The ASA plan and transparency

Stuart Dick made the first statement, expressing Citizens for Morrow County Liberty and Justice want a resolution rather than a recall. He proceeded to outline numerous concerns that his group has with the county commissioners. One issue he brought up was the development of a new ASA plan, which, according to him, lacked clear justification.

Stuart emphasized that the lack of communication and transparency from the commissioners was deeply concerning. He criticized their failure to involve the Morrow County Health District in the decision-making process, which he believed was an essential stakeholder in such matters. The commissioners' disregard for honesty and adherence to established rules was seen as problematic by Stuart and his group.

Commissioner Sykes was the first to speak on behalf of the county. He mentioned the new ASA plan and emphasized that when we took office a year ago, this issue was on his desk. Sykes said since this matter was in dispute, he sought the guidance of their county council who advised them that the issue was quite complex and suggested seeking the expertise of an attorney. The attorney said that it was indeed the county's responsibility to establish the ASA and that was the course of action he adhered to. Sykes said he believed it would be neglectful towards the residents of Morrow County if the commissioners were to disregard the legal advice given to them and there are no ulterior motives, I don't have any, and no conspiracies are going on.

He then reiterated his statements from prior meetings and talked about the ASA explaining that they are currently in the process of having their proposal reviewed by the Oregon Health Authority (OHA). Once approved, they will proceed with selecting a healthcare provider for the district. Sykes expressed disappointment over the health district's decision to discontinue their ambulance service before the



John Murray MCHD

issue could be fully resolved. Despite the county's request to continue the service in the interim, the health district chose not to comply.

Regarding transparency, Sykes states that they held four public hearings to gather input, even though there was no official plan in place at the time. He assures the public that a plan will be presented, and they will hold five more public hearings in each city, as necessary. The current plan can be found on their website, but it is not yet finalized or approved by the OHA, which has the final authority in such matters.

John Murray, representing the Morrow County Health District was up next. He stated that the district has been operating ambulance services for 30 years without any intervention or assistance from the county court. They have achieved this while maintaining one of the lowest healthcare taxing rates in eastern Oregon. 61 cents per 1,000 permanent rate and 99 cents per 1,000 rate with supplemental levy.

Murray announced that after the recent Health District board meeting held last Monday, they have sent an ASA contract to the commissioners. He said the contract is intended to facilitate the signing of an agreement that would provide coverage for the entire county and guarantee uninterrupted service.

Murray compares the tax rates of other health districts in eastern Oregon, highlighting that Morrow County's rates are considerably lower. He emphasizes that the health district has diligently and efficiently managed its funds, even utilizing critical access Medicare dollars from the Memorial Hospital to offset expenses to the county. However, Murray raises concerns that the health district's funding may be jeopardized if the Board of Commissioners develops a 2024 ASA, which goes against federal rules that provide for these federal dollars or they will drastically alter the tax rates of



Commissioner Roy Drago

the health district.

Murray concluded by emphasizing that the ultimate decision-makers for the county's healthcare future are the Board of Commissioners, not the health district's board of directors. The responsibility falls on the commissioners to make informed choices that will sustain the rural healthcare system and consider the long-term impact on the community.

Morrow Commissioner Drago approached the microphone and said, according to their records, the last time OHA (Oregon Health Authority) approved an ASA was in 1993. He clarified that this information was not his statement, but the official stance of OHA. Drago read a letter from OHA to the county commissioners stating that they had not received an updated plan and he claimed that letter was sent to the county in 2021.

Commissioner Drago said he was not directly accusing anyone but highlighted that the commissioners had inherited this issue and are actively working towards resolving it.

Murray returned with a rebuttal, stating that he can obtain copies from OHA of the ASAs that have been filed every five years. He emphasized that it is the responsibility of the county to provide the ASAs to the OHA.

Murray also expressed his desire to hire a lawyer who would provide him with answers that align with his preferences. He proposed gathering five lawyers in a room to determine whether they could reach a consensus or at least arrive at a similar opinion about the ASA, and the county. Additionally, Murray mentioned that other healthcare lawyers in the state may not necessarily agree with the views of the county's lawyer.

He also had concerns about the County Administrator, Matt Jensen, and his contingency plan to secure interim ambulances in case an agreement couldn't be reached. Murray questioned how the selection process

was conducted. He again mentioned that MCHD had sent a contract to Morrow County, indicating that MCHD's proposal was likely to be shelved. This would create a gap in service, and the contract signing deadline. During this time, the county would be searching for another provider and initiating the process in mid-February. Murray raised concerns about the committee members responsible for selecting the service provider during the interim period, as the ASA had not been assigned yet. He was concerned about who would be chosen to provide services and the implications it may have. Murray confirmed that there had been no public meeting regarding this matter to his knowledge. He pointed out that decisions like these were often made behind closed doors, making it challenging to trust the information being conveyed and the discrepancy between public statements and actual actions was a recurring problem that needed to be addressed.

Sykes responded by saying that this is still a work in progress, and everyone is guessing what is in and is not in the new ASA plan and it has not been approved yet. When it is rolled out, everyone will be able to look at it. He reiterated that the Morrow County Health District set the drop-dead date for ambulance service, and the county wanted to keep working with the MCHD under the current ASA until a new ASA could get worked out. Sykes said the county did not kick them out.

Jody Ferguson spoke and said that there is no way Morrow County is ready to replace the service by March. MCHD voted on Monday on a contract, they sent it to the county on Tuesday morning and she said she had not heard whether they have said anything about it or not. She said 12,000 residents of Morrow County deserve to have equal ambulance service that they have had in the past. She said she did not personally care how much the contract cost but said to sign it. She said we would not be in this position if this would have been handled in good faith from the beginning. She said she would agree that most people in the county would agree with her and said again to sign the contract. "You three commis-

-Continued to PAGE EIGHT

## 200 attend a successful Town and Country Awards in Heppner



(L-R) Cameron Proudfoot, Janet Wilson, Tim Dickeson, Beth Dickenson, Molly Rhea, Faviola Juarez, and Jackie Juarez Emmel. -Photo by D2 Photography

By Chris Sykes

On Thursday, February 1st, the Heppner Chamber of Commerce held its annual Town and Country event to honor residents and business owners who consistently went above and beyond to help the community. The atmosphere was fun, and the Gilliam Bisbee building was filled with around 200 people in attendance. Tears of happiness were shed as the deserving recipients took to the stage to receive their well-deserved awards.

Families came from different parts of the U.S. to witness their loved ones being recognized for their outstanding contributions. Beth Dickenson's family joined the event virtually from Iowa, connecting via

video conference to congratulate Beth and Tim.

After a thorough run-down of remarkable accomplishments for lifetime achievement, presenter Jerry Conklin was abruptly interrupted by Molly Rhea, the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement award. Fed up with waiting, Molly confidently took the stage, snatched the microphone, delivered a funny speech, and thanked everyone.

During the entire event, the crowd consistently stood up, applauding and cheering for the well-deserving award winners. The drinks were served by Bucknums, while Alvin Lou from Happy Pappy took charge of preparing

-Continued to PAGE THREE

## Rep. Smith appointed to ACSR joint committee



Representative Greg Smith speaking at the senior center in Heppner, Or - Contributed Photo

On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Speaker Rayfield appointed Representative Greg Smith (R-Heppner) to serve on the Joint Committee on Addiction and Community Safety Response. This committee will have the task of reviewing Measure 110 and proposing solutions to the public safety and behavioral health crises the State of Oregon is facing.

"This is going to be a very challenging committee, as we are tackling

very serious issues. My approach will be one of justice and mercy," said Representative Smith in a press release, "Oregon must hold people accountable for the crimes they have committed but the State must also ensure that people in crisis have adequate access to resources. Striking a balance between criminal accountability and the need for behavioral health resources will be key to this committee's success".

## Mustang sports this week

This week is Senior Night for basketball. The games are on Feb. 8th against Stanfield. JV Girls start at 3. JV Boys are at 4:30, Varsity girls are at 6 and Varsity Boys are at 7:30. The theme is blue, and gold so please wear

blue and gold to support your teams. There is also district wrestling on Friday Feb. 9th in Echo. It continues into Saturday where the finals will take place. We encourage you to support our Heppner wrestling team.

## Morrow County issues a statement on the Health Districts ASA contract

Morrow County - January 31, 2024, Morrow County Health District (MCHD) submitted a contract on January 30, 2024, to continue ambulance service for the County past their 90-day notice to terminate service on March 12, 2024. The contract received is a long-term contract that was self-serving, unlawful, could not be terminated for 5 years, and was not in the best interest of the residents of Morrow County. There was no discussion regard-

ing MCHD paying for legal counsel to draft the contract, as that was MCHD's choice and offer, and the contract received was a surprise and a disappointment. While the contract is described as an effort to continue service leaving no area of the County out, it is better described as an effort to interfere with the County's legal obligation to implement a new Ordinance and ASA Plan, ignores Oregon law, and uses what MCHD apparently perceives to be

an advantage it created by giving its 90-day termination notice. Specific major items include the following:

- MCHD is attempting to strongarm the County into an exclusive and non-terminable agreement for ambulance services, and for control over ambulance services within the County. This is contrary to ORS 682.063 (1) (a) which requires the County to "consider any and all

-Continued to PAGE FIVE

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