

Recall meeting wrap up in Irrigon

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sioners are here to serve the people and we deserve the same ambulance service we have had. I encourage you to think about the people you serve, slow down your process, develop the ASA plan, possibly add multiple providers and do it right the first time. I believe it's very clear that you want there to be or you are being pressured to have multiple providers, whatever, we don't care, we are talking about right now, this moment, we need you to do what's best for over 12,000 residents, not the few who want to block MCHD. You claim to be an excellent negotiator of contracts, for example, Amazon. Get around the table with the health district, negotiate the details, and sign the contract. Let Morrow County residents have less to worry about."

Sticking with the issue of transparency, Stuart Dick said that there is not enough dialogue at the commissioner meeting and wanted it to be like the previous commissioner meeting where he said they let people talk back and forth with commissioners during the meetings.

New Circuit Court Building Site

Stuart asked who was on the committee that established the place next to the rodeo grounds. He asked if parking had been secured for the new building.

Sykes explained that the process was all in open and documented in the minutes. He said it began when Circuit Court Judge Hill approached us, expressing that the current courthouse is unacceptable. He said Judge Hill highlighted the lack of security and insufficient room space, emphasizing that this concern had been raised for quite some time. Sykes said he researched the problems with the old courthouse and began working towards securing a new location since Judge Hill had suggested an alternative by removing the circuit court from Heppner and combining it with the one in Hermiston. Sykes said he went to Salem, testified, and successfully obtained funding for half of the project. Additionally, Sykes said they approached the City of Heppner and asked for potential sites, resulting in the provision of nine options. After an open meeting, they collectively selected four sites and voted to hire an architectural firm to evaluate them. An executive session was held to discuss one of the private properties, as they wanted to keep this information confidential to protect the use of county funds.

Sykes mentioned that the project manager is currently working on developing the plans for the building. However, he acknowledged that the number of parking spots required for the facility has not yet been determined. To gather this information, Sykes sought assistance from Stephen, an expert in mapping and a member of the Planning Commission. Using a county drone, Stephen took aerial pictures of the site during peak hours, specifically the fair and rodeo on a Saturday afternoon. These images will enable architects and planners to accurately count the available parking spaces and assess any potential shortfall.

Wages

Stuart said he has changed his mind about salaries and said he has seen how hard the commissioners have worked and he knows how hard he has worked, and it's exhausting and said he is backing off on that one. He does want to see the commissioners set an office time so people can meet with them. He also

questioned why the county needed \$360,000 for two administrators.

Back to ASA

Melissa on Zoom posed a question regarding whether the commissioners admitted to dividing the service between Boardman Fire and Morrow County Health District.

Commissioner Drago responded by stating that he was unaware of the accusation's origin and insisted that they had not selected anyone for any ASA within the county. He emphasized that they have no predetermined notions about who will be chosen for the ASA. Once the ASA is established, anyone interested can apply for it. Drago said Morrow County Health District took a firm stance, stating that if they don't receive the entire service area, they don't want any part of it and said he found this confusing seeing that having more ambulances in the service area would be beneficial.

Drago announced that there will be five open town hall meetings. During these meetings, attendees will have the opportunity to ask questions, and the commissioner and his team will do their best to provide answers and engage in discussion. Drago also explained that the County Administrator Matt Jensen was not present at the meeting this time due to a threat of a lawsuit that prevented him from attending.

Murray took to the mic again and asked how is Irrigon's Fire supposed to grow when Boardman Fire wanted to annex the Columbia Development Authority (CDA) and all the growth in the CDA, doesn't the 4 billion dollars from the Port of Morrow cover most of the costs? Boardman Fire wants the CDA because it is an area where more development is expected to happen. Who is the CDA rep from the county, Murray asked the commissioners. (Someone in the crowd answered Jeff Wenzholz) When did his committee vote to send out a Request for Proposal (RFP) for ambulance or fire services in that area? I understand this is a CDA-related question and you may not have all the details, but your representative should know. Where is the legal RFP for services in the CDA? And why does Boardman Fire believe they can expand their ambulance services and take over taxing districts for fire services? Murray said these kinds of questions raise concerns about the lack of transparency in the decision-making process.

Sykes Responded to Murray and said the CDA and the county commissioners are two separate entities. We do not have control over the CDA, and they do not control us. They hold their own meetings and have their own boards. These are two distinct entities.

Murray explained, regarding the issue of the Boardman Fire extension of the service district to cover the CDA, it is ultimately the County Commission's responsibility to decide. I asked Administrator Jensen about it, and he said that the commissioners will address it once the ASA issue is resolved. Murray said the power and responsibility lie with the County Commission in making decisions like these.

Murray continued, acknowledging that these matters often happen behind the scenes. The County Commission holds substantial power and responsibility. I have learned to appreciate the position they are in a lot of the time. However, when it comes

down to it, it is the County Commission that has the authority.

Sykes said the reason why this issue hasn't been discussed openly is because we have not reached that point yet. It will come before the County Commission for discussion and consideration. We will bring it to the agenda when it is ready and have all the necessary information. Sykes said we cannot provide answers and make decisions before thoroughly discussing and considering the matter. Demanding immediate answers without having all the facts in front of us is not a reasonable approach. We need to have a clear understanding of the ASA structure and have proper discussions before making any decisions. The CDA has not even been discussed yet, so it is not fair to demand an answer at this stage.

Teresa (Tess) Rehak, a Morrow County resident stepped forward to address a question that had been raised by a previous speaker regarding who had authorized the county to seek temporary ambulance services in the interim if the county does discontinue ambulance service. Tess asserted that the state had provided authorization for this action, and she emphasized that the Health District was well aware of this fact as it was clearly stated in the Oregon Revised Statutes (ORS). Tess expressed frustration with the misinformation that was being spread and clarified that nobody had mentioned the county purchasing ambulances, in response to a statement made by County Administrator Jensen claiming to have secured ambulances. According to Tess, Jensen had followed state law by finding a suitable alternative and securing the ambulances. She further explained that this action was necessary because the health district had decided to terminate ambulance services after the levy - which had been proposed and passed to ensure ambulance availability - was approved by voters.

Amazon tax abatement

Stuart Dick returned to inform the crowd that we can secure better deals from Amazon. The Morrow County Commissioner recently approved a package of tax incentives for five additional Amazon data centers in eastern Oregon. However, he was concerned about the limited employment opportunities they provide and the significant increase in power consumption, equivalent to powering 200,000 homes. The main reason Amazon is coming here is due to the tax benefits they are receiving.

Dick said the commissioners have limited expertise in negotiating such deals compared to Amazon, one of the biggest companies in the world. He claimed other counties, like Wasco, have reduced property taxes by half through their agreements with Amazon and Google. In contrast, we are granting Amazon an 85% tax abatement, which raises questions about where this money ultimately goes and leads to disputes in the county.

Stuart said that we should halt any new tax abatement for Amazon until our county develops the necessary expertise, courage, and integrity to negotiate better deals. We should not forget that Amazon needs us more than we need them, as they rely on our electricity and infrastructure.

Nitrates

Ray Akers spoke expressing his frustration that none of the commissioners attended their group meet-

ing regarding the nitrates in the groundwater. However, he acknowledged that Commissioner Drago and Sykes had attended some previous meetings but have now discontinued their participation.

Akers said nitrate pollution is his passion area and doesn't care about the courthouse and all the other "bullsh*t" that goes along with it. He commended what John Murray and Kelly Doherty have been doing at the Port.

There is an urgent and pressing issue at hand regarding nitrogen pollution that must be addressed. Akers stressed the importance of receiving support from county officials and community members to effectively tackle this problem.

Akers expressed disappointment in hearing about the supposed "great things" the commissioners have done, as they have had no significant impact. Both the state and the continuous dumping practices have failed the community. He stated that this dumping is nothing short of reckless and harmful. It serves no beneficial purpose and only leads to the contamination of our soil and, consequently, our wells. Akers declared that we can no longer ignore this issue and must take action at every level.

Sykes responded to Akers by saying, "It's interesting. These two gentlemen want me recalled," as he pointed at Akers and Dick. "They held a meeting to generate support for a recall, and now he's blaming the nitrate issue on the County Commissioners. Man Roy, (referring to the other county commissioner in the audience) we must be so powerful if we can supposedly pollute the groundwater." Sykes gestured towards Akers and continued, "He sits there and asks us to list all the great things we've done. Well, I can tell you what we've accomplished. We have provided fresh water. I even instructed departments to come up with a list of our contributions. We dedicated 5,000 man-hours and over \$300,000 of your money to address the issue. We have secured a \$1.7 million federal grant. The problem is, when I took office, I realized the severity of the nitrate issue. The county didn't cause it, but I made it a priority to identify and solve the problem."

Sykes said these problems encompass various aspects of LUBGMA and specifically mentioned that out of the total 4,700 wells, 20% are located in Morrow County, while the remaining wells are situated in Umatilla County. In order to tackle these challenges head-on, the federal government, in conjunction with Senators Merkley and Wyden, has allocated funding of 1.7 million dollars to both counties. Sykes also acknowledged the efforts of Tamara Mabbitt, the planner who is working towards resolving the issues. Furthermore, there are plans to enlist the services of a reputable water company to conduct a thorough assessment of the situation and provide a comprehensive overview of the problem.

Sykes said every time Wyden and Merkley came, I'd say, okay, are you going to do the lifting on this? Are you guys going to be with us? Each time they always said, we're going to be with Morrow County.

Akers again came to the mic and claimed that the \$1.7 million was secured by former County Commissioner Melissa Lindsay and County Planner Tamra Mabbott. Akers claimed that the three current county commissioners could stop it and stop it tomorrow and

wanted to see the contracts with the Port of Morrow.

John Murray, who was elected to the Port of Morrow Board last year, addressed the issue of water disposal and the Port's responsibility. In his opinion, the Port has not done enough in the last ten years to address this issue. Murray believes that the county should assist citizens until a resolution is found. The Port acknowledges the problem and has been working in collaboration with the DEQ and EPA to develop a plan for better water treatment. To fund this project, the Port has borrowed hundreds of millions of dollars. Murray posed the question of whether they should shut down the Port and cease water operations but answered it himself by saying that it is not a viable option. The Port Commission has chosen to continue with its plan in partnership with the DEQ. Murray said they have outlined a plan to eliminate nitrates from wastewater by mid-2025. However, he emphasized that this process cannot be instant and will require the construction of expensive ponds and treatment centers. He understands the frustration of the community but emphasizes that shutting down businesses is not a feasible solution. While efforts have been made to mitigate the nitrates in well water, even with perfectly clean water, there may still be residual effects during winter when the water is applied to the soil. Despite the costs involved, Murray stresses that the Port's primary concern is fulfilling its obligations and ensuring the well-being of the community.

Dick wanted to discuss the issue further and referenced two individuals, John Murray and Kelly Doherty, who are both board members of the Port of Morrow. According to Dick, these individuals, like the county commissioners, inherited a problem. Dick then shifted his focus to Oregon House Representative Greg Smith, highlighting Smith's role on the budget board and his oversight of funding for the DEQ. According to Dick, it has been documented that Smith ensured that the DEQ did not impose fines on the Port. Stuart argued that if action had been taken seven years ago, the issue would have been resolved by now. He expressed frustration that the Port seemed unconcerned about the harmful effects of their actions, such as "pouring out the poison" and making deals with Amazon for their own benefit. Stuart believed that this situation should have been addressed years ago, and he vowed to bring forth evidence to demonstrate why Greg Smith used his position to protect the Port. Stuart also mentioned that Smith receives a \$100,000 annual salary from the Port, implying a potential conflict of interest. He concluded

by claiming that there was a significant amount of corruption and unethical practices within the political realm.

Commissioner Drago, who is also on the LUBGMA board, came up and listed the contribution to the water issue from last year. The water provided was over \$40,000, filters purchased approximately \$18,000, and filter installation \$44,000. Outside funding for that comes from Business Oregon, Business coalition, and State of Oregon miscellaneous revenue.

Drago asked Akers what he thought the solution would be.

Askers said, let's have some of these industries that are putting nitrate in the groundwater step to the plate, don't just leave it all on the Port. There are things businesses can do internally to reduce nitrates. Akers said I am not about shutting down every industry in Boardman, that would be a lot of jobs, and its political suicide. But we can do things that are better for the community. He claimed that the nitrate numbers in the wells continue to increase. Akers also claimed there is a lawsuit that is getting filed in the next few days.

Drago stated that the problem of nitrate contamination has been a persistent issue for quite some time, long before the Port and industry in Boardman. As early as 1954, a well in the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area (LUBGMA) showed nitrate levels of 57 parts per million. (According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) the maximum contaminant level for nitrates is 10 parts per million.) Exposure below these levels is not expected to cause significant health problems, and all public water supplies must adhere to these regulations. It's not a new issue and it's been here forever. Drago again asked what to do and said he didn't know what the right solution is and there isn't one right solution. There are lots of things that need to be done. We are working at it, and we want to get it right the first time, just like the ASA. We can't make any business do anything, the DEQ is in charge of that, and issues permits. It is a very complex issue and will take time.

There was a vote taken at the end of the meeting to recall the commissioner and it went 8 votes No and 6 yes.

There were additional speakers and members of the community who attended the recall meeting, and further information is available from the event. The entire meeting was recorded on video. The final meeting took place on Tuesday, February 6th in Boardman. If any new or important updates arise, the Heppner Gazette will provide coverage of it.

**ALL NEWS AND ADVERTISEMENT DEADLINE:
MONDAY 5:00 P.M.**



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146 N Main Street
Heppner
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Lunch & Dinner Menu

Specials 2/8 - 2/14

Thursday - Mini tacos, chips, refried beans, and rice.

Friday - Chicken & Wild Rice soup and a grilled turkey & Swiss

Saturday - Broccoli Cheese with grilled ham & cheese

Sunday - Open for Super Bowl 2-11pm

Monday - Chicken plus with baked beans

Tuesday - Chili burger with jojos

Tuesday Night 6-9pm \$2 hard shell tacos

Wednesday - Chicken Dumpling Soup & salad