



# the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

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## County, Health District take tentative steps toward peace, but will it last?

By Chris Sykes

Feb 8th - As the ambulance service dispute escalates, tensions have run high with a flurry of Facebook attacks, threats, rumors, innuendo, battling media press releases, and a waves of misinformation circulating. This has created a challenging environment for reaching a civil conclusion on the matter. However, a potential breakthrough meeting took place on February 8th between the Morrow County Commissioners and the Morrow County Health District Board. This marked a significant milestone in the ongoing attempts to resolve the future of the ambulance service in Morrow County.

One of the primary objectives of this meeting was to address the rampant drama and misinformation that has been fueling discussions in the public. Additionally, the aim was to establish more effective communication channels, organize future joint meetings, and joint statements, and ensure that interactions with the media and on Facebook are handled appropriately. The meeting attracted considerable attention, with 55 individuals from the public joining remotely via the Zoom.

Representing the Morrow County Health District were Diane Kilkenny, the Chair of the Morrow County Health District, Trista Seastone, serving as Vice Chair of the Health District. Additionally, John Murray, Steven Munkers and Scott Ezell, who hold positions as Board Members of the Health District, were also in attendance.

Also in attendance were Emily Roberts, the CEO of the Health District, and Sam Van Laer, the Chief Medical Officer of the Health District.

Representing Morrow County were Board Chair



Dave Sykes, Commissioner Roy Drago, and Commissioner Jeff Wenholz. Valerie Ballard, a Morrow County representative, and Greg Goebel, Morrow County Council were also present.

Diane Kilkenny from the Health District began the meeting with an opening statement, stating that the purpose of the meeting was to find common ground and move forward. The meeting would discuss rules for future meetings, the framework of future meetings, media, and press release discussions, and the set of future meetings. She said the focus should be on what is best for the residents, government, and Health District of Morrow County, and the importance of being good community partners and collaborators.

David Sykes made his opening statement from the County's side, saying he agreed with Kilkenny's remarks but also wanted to add to it. Sykes stressed the importance of moving forward and avoiding getting caught up in past grievances. He suggested that focusing on history and pointing fingers would only hinder progress and potentially worsen the situation. Sykes said, "If we sit here around this table and start saying, well, you said this and you did this, this is going to circle and we're not going to get anywhere." Instead, he proposed setting goals for the next meeting and working towards finding solutions to specific issues without dwelling on past transgressions. Sykes believes the meetings could



be more productive and constructive.

John Murray from the Health District spoke. Murray was out of town at a conference but attended the meeting via Zoom and agreed with all the opening comments that were made.

The rules Kilkenny asked if there were any suggestions about rules and refraining from delving into past matters. After outlining the agenda, she opened the floor for suggestions. Sykes was the first to speak up, highlighting the need for this discussion to involve only the Health District Board of Directors and the Morrow County Commissioners, noting that the MCHD staff was at the table. He sought clarification on the extent to which the MCHD staff would be allowed to participate. Would they be allowed to join in when they wanted, would they be strictly forbidden from speaking or would they be permitted to respond if directly addressed? What circumstance would they be allowed to join the discussion? Sykes emphasized the need to establish these guidelines upfront to avoid any misunderstandings or assumptions moving forward. He also asked about public participation and people-watching on Zoom.

Murray favored holding discussions directly between the boards. He proposed that if anyone had any inquiries for the staff, they should address them directly. Both parties reached a consensus that the conversation should

primarily involve the board members and the commissioners, with the staff being questioned by their respective boards and both sides agreed.

Facebook and press releases

The topic of Facebook and press releases was brought up, to find an effective method to deliver press releases and statements to the public. The main concern was addressing the spread of rumors and misinformation on both Facebook and other media platforms.

Murray proposed the idea of a joint press release, which gained interest from both parties. This sparked a shift in the discussion towards assigning responsibility for releasing information.

Several suggestions were put forth, including the idea of having all information run up through the board chairs exclusively for posting on Facebook and the same with their press releases. This suggestion garnered some support.

However, Commissioner Drago raised a valid concern. He pointed out that this approach may not be feasible due to a restriction that prohibits commissioners from engaging in discussions related to county matters outside of regular business meetings. This concern prompted further consideration and exploration of alternative approaches.

It was decided that both the MCHD and the County would engage in a collaborative process of exchanging statements via email or written and delivered in-person letters. The participants agreed to have both parties thoroughly review the statements and press releases, making any necessary changes, before their official release.

-Continued to PAGE SEVEN

## 2024 Annual St. Patrick's Wee Bit O'Ireland Celebration March 15 - 17

The Annual St. Patrick's Wee Bit O'Ireland Celebration is scheduled for Friday, March 15 through Sunday, March 17, 2024. If your business, non-profit or church group is planning an event/activity during the St. Patrick's weekend, please contact Madison Rosenbalm at the Chamber office at 541-676-5536 or [heppnerchamber@gmail.com](mailto:heppnerchamber@gmail.com).

We will include your event in the printed program. Submit your event/activity by Thursday, February 15<sup>th</sup>.

This year's St. Patrick's Day Celebration will include most of its traditional activities, along with some new, and older, revitalized events. All entertainment will be free, with sponsorship from Morrow County Unified Recreation District.

## Hanna and Matheny advance to regionals in Elks Hoop Shoot



(L-R) Berkley Hanna with her third-place trophy, Sonny Matheny with his first place trophy. - Contributed Photo



East District competitors for each age group with District Director Corey Sweeney and East District Vice President Charles Caughlin. - Contributed Photo

Sonny Matheny and Berkley Hanna competed at the State Elks Hoop Shoot on February 10 in Silverton. Berkley received third place for the 8-9-year-old girls. Sonny received first place for 8-9 boys shooting 19 of 25 and will advance to the regional competition. Regionals is the same format as the local, district and state competitions and will be held on March 16 at Kamiakin High School in Kennewick, Washington. The first-place winners

from regionals will advance to the National Elks Hoop Shoot in Chicago, Illinois from April 18 - 21. The Elks National Hoop Shoot is a free throw program for youth aged 8-23. The program was established in 1946 by the late-Past National President Frank Hise in Corvallis, Oregon. To participate, find a contest by entering your zip code and age group on the official Elk Hoop Shoot website.

## MCHD Press Release: Update to Heppner City Council

Why won't Morrow County Health District extend the 90-day notice period?

First and foremost, we do not believe an extension is in the best interests of our communities or our ambulance crews. A swift resolution to this situation

is necessary to mitigate serious, ongoing safety issues occurring in the field as a result of the conflict over which entity should provide ambulance service.

Although there is a tight timeline for resolution

-Continued from PAGE TEN

## ASA debate continues BOC meeting Feb. 7<sup>th</sup>

Morrow County Board of Commissioners Chair David Sykes told the audience it was not a debate or question and answer time, but that the commissioners did welcome discussion outside of the meeting. He pointed out that the agenda contained the contact information for the three commissioners.

"We would be happy to talk to any of you whenever you want to," Sykes said.

Emily Roberts, Morrow County health District CEO, said the health district did not oppose the county considering all proposals, but that MCHD felt a single-provider ASA was the best for the county and that she understood no other proposals had been received. She added that Boardman Fire had three years to submit a proposal and had yet to do so. She also said that considering interim providers rather than MCHD was not the best choice for the county and did not "consider the

will of the people."

"We have only 35 days to resolve this situation," she said. "Morrow County residents have been speaking out in support of MCHD's ambulance services for the past three years."

She also called it "offensive" that Morrow County Administrator Matthew Jensen would consider MCHD's EMS advisory committee "compromised." While she did not elaborate, the comment may have referred to previous statements by Jensen that having MCHD control the EMS committee invited an inherent ethical concerns.

"I would trust any person on that committee with my life," said Roberts.

"Regardless of anything that has happened in the past, we have 35 days left to resolve this situation in a way that continues the same level of service we have had," Roberts said. "We are asking the county to put in a final effort to

make this happen on behalf of our residents."

Tina Davidson of Heppner, who has been an EMT for 14 years, spoke about the personal effects of any ASA decision.

"I believe that a different ambulance service will not be familiar with our area, our mountains, rural medicine," she said, fighting tears. "We know this area. It's affecting all of us. It's been stressful."

"I didn't get into EMS for all of this to happen. I got into EMS to help my community, and I still feel that way."

Stephen Munkers of Irrigon, a MCHD board member,

"I was under the impression that this is the county of Morrow, not the county of Boardman or any other large entity," he said. "This divisiveness isn't good for the county."

"I want the commissioners to represent all of the people, not just one end or the other or whatever."

Nicole Mahoney, CFO and COO for MCHD, said a recent county press release falsely accused the health district of deceptive accounting practices before having a negotiated and signed agreement, calling the statements "misleading and slanderous."

"You make it appear that we have no fiscal ac-

-Continued to PAGE FIVE

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