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Tensions continue to ride high over county ambulance services

By Andrea Di Salvo

Tensions continue to rise and accusations fly as the debate over ambulance services in Morrow County continues with no end in sight.

The Morrow County Board of Commissioners meeting last week in Irrigon began with a continuation of the same debate that has enveloped Morrow County for months, raising controversy over the future of ambulance services in the county.

Meanwhile, the Morrow County Health District (MCHD) rejected an offer by the Morrow County Board of Commissioners at the health district's meeting Monday night, a funding request from the health district was tabled pending receipt of financial records, and the county seems poised to move forward with Boardman Fire Rescue District (BFRD) as an interim ambulance service provider for the county.

BOC Backlash

The board of commissioners has been receiving plenty of public backlash recently, including a recall effort begun earlier this

month, and last Wednesday's meeting was no different.

Despite having a couple of meetings between the Morrow County BOC and the health district board, MCHD CEO Emily Roberts was present to rehash previous ground during public comment.

Roberts laid out the history of the dispute from the health district's perspective and commented that it was reasonable to conclude that the county "revoked" the 2021 Ambulance Service Area plan simply to give Boardman Fire a chance to become another ambulance service provider.

Roberts did say that the county and the health district had come to an agreement on the terms of the ASA plan and ordinance but added that the remaining piece of the puzzle for the health district was a service contract.

"Without a service contract in place, our current ambulance service will cease to operate on March 13, 2024," she said.

She said a two-year extension agreement would avoid the problem.

"We have serious concerns about the county's ability to provide substitute services, and we continue to hope that the county will make the right decision," Roberts said.

Aaron Palmquist, Irrigon City Manager and former member of the MCHD board, said that, though the county's documents look better than they did in December, there continued to be rumors flying concerning the ambulance service area plan.

"There's still very much strong support in Irrigon of how we keep Irrigon whole," Palmquist said. He said the meetings between the BOC and health district need to be more public, and warned commissioners of the message they were sending.

"I would strongly say that there people not only across South County but in Irrigon that do not want Boardman Fire or ambulance over here," he said. "We stand firm on that, and I think the commissioners need to hear that and say, 'Get to the table, stop doing the dancing, and make it work.'"

John Kilkenny of Heppner, a rural fire district volunteer and the husband of MCHD board chair Diane Kilkenny, said Boardman Fire's interim plan was not well thought out, and leaves Heppner without adequate backup if a second ambulance is needed.

"It's not going to work," he said. "It looks like somebody's high school assignment to come up with an ambulance service plan for this entire county."

"You can't just plug these widgets into your model and make it work," he added. "Get back to the table and sign a contract with Morrow County Health District."

Gus Peterson of Ione said he was "immensely disappointed" in the way the ambulance service area situation has been handled.

Peterson stated that the county told MCHD that signing an agreement now was unreasonable, as the new ASA would be ready "soon," but that the proposed contract with BFRD could go up to 180 days.

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Stalemate returns in ambulance negotiations

5 year contract and \$1 Million per year offer rejected

By Andrea Di Salvo

After a couple of weeks of apparent progress in reaching a resolution regarding the Morrow County Ambulance Service Area (ASA) plan, talks between Morrow County government and the Morrow County Health District seem to have ground to a halt at the MCHD meeting Monday night.

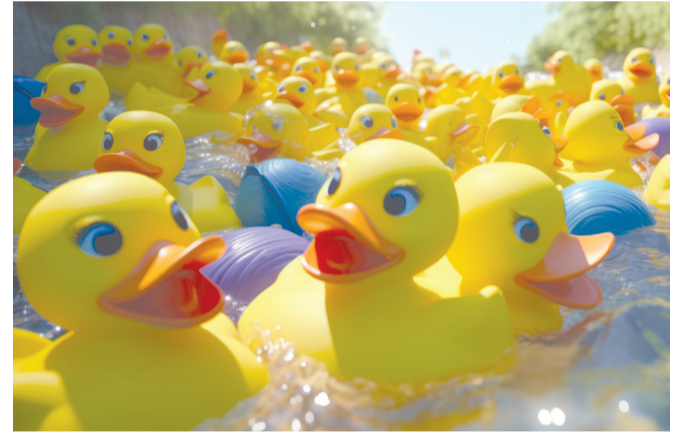
The county presented the health district with a contract option that would have given MCHD the

contract for the Northeast ASA, which covers the Irrigon area, and South Morrow County. The North ASA, containing Boardman and the surrounding area, would have been awarded to Boardman Fire Rescue District (BFRD) under the agreement.

In addition, Morrow County Administrator Matthew Jensen said the county would "make whole" the health district finances by reimbursing the health

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O' Ducky Race



-Contributed Photo

Since the 1990's the O'Ducky Race has been a part of the Wee Bit O' Ireland Celebration in Heppner! Over the years, many different organizations have sponsored the event. This will be the third year that the Heppner High School softball team is sponsoring the event. This serves as an annual fundraiser to help the program purchase equipment and apparel for each season.

How does the O'Ducky Race work you might ask? You purchase a rubber duck; each duck has a number and symbol to track who

purchased the duck. All the ducks that are purchased are dumped into Willow Creek at the bridge behind the library and they race to the finish line behind the playground at the park. First, second, and third place ducks will win a cash prize!

Ducks can be purchased in front of Bucknums from 9-1 on Saturday, March 16th. Be on the lookout for additional times and days to purchase ducks leading up to Saturday. Ducks are 1 for \$5 or 5 ducks for \$20. The Mustang Softball program thanks you in advance for your support! Let's get ready to race!

MC press release following Monday MCHD meeting

Morrow County - February 27, 2024 - It is with concern and sadness that Morrow County must report that last night, Morrow County Health District (MCHD) rejected consideration of a compromise option that would have had MCHD continue ambulance service in the Irrigon and South County areas. The compromise option was a framework for a possible contract and was open to further development. It featured the following considerations:

- MCHD would continue to operate ambulance service in Irrigon, and the South County areas as currently constituted. Boardman Fire Rescue District would provide ambulance service in the Boardman

area. This approach would save residents of Morrow County up to \$800,000.

- MCHD would have a five-year contract to provide stability and fiscal planning assurances.

• Morrow County would compensate MCHD for financial loss for operating ambulances in their areas in the amount up to \$1 million per year. Per MCHD records, the Irrigon and South County areas reported a loss of over \$400,000 in FY2023. While current loss projections for FY2024 have not been provided by MCHD, the \$1 million was a starting point to help make MCHD whole for the increase of staffing that has occurred

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Friends Helping Friends Committee: Providing a Helping Hand



The Friends Helping Friends Committee (L-R) Kathi Dickenson, Kristen Harrison, Peggy Fishburn, Shelly McCabe, Jacque Wilson, Janelle Ellis, Susan Hisler and Patty Matheny. - Contributed Photo

By Annalynn Black

The Friends Helping Friends committee was established in the year 2009 with a noble purpose - to provide support and assistance in covering community medical expenses. Recognizing the financial hardships faced by individuals and families dealing with medical issues, the committee aimed to alleviate the burden and offer a helping hand during these challenging times.

In their quest to raise funds for this cause, the committee conceived the idea of organizing an event that would not only generate financial contributions but also serve as a touching tribute to Donna Schonbachler, a beloved local resident who tragically lost her battle with breast cancer. Thus, the first annual Remembrance Walk was born.

The St. Patrick's Day Remembrance Walk/5K Run is an annual event that takes place on the morning of the St. Patrick's parade and festivities on the 16th of March, regardless of the weather conditions. Participants can choose to either run or walk the des-

ignated route, each adorned with vibrant Shamrocks. These Shamrocks serve as heartfelt memorials to individuals in our community who have passed away, and they include pictures to honor their memory. It acts as a tribute, bringing the community together to remember and celebrate the lives of those who are no longer with us.

The Friends Helping Friends committee has been successful in raising significant funds each year through this event. These funds are then allocated towards assisting with expenses in the community. Various organizations and facilities have benefited from this financial support, including Pioneer Memorial Home Health/Hospice, PMH, Heppner Day Care, St. Patrick's Senior Center, South Morrow County Fire and Ambulance Service and EMT's, Elks Club, Willow Creek Terrace, and Pioneer Memorial Therapy Services. These contributions help alleviate the burden of medical costs for individuals and families in need, ensuring that everyone receives the care and support they deserve.

When asked by a reporter from the Gazette Shelly McCabe, Heppner resident and member of the FHF Committee since 2011, says "My favorite part of the morning is having the kids find our loved one's shamrocks and telling them stories about the special people that have passed on. The St. Patrick's Day Remembrance Walk/5K Run highlights the importance of "community" in Heppner. The Remembrance Walk/5k Run starts a time most would refer to as early on Saturday of Heppner's St. Patrick's Day festivities and often it is cold, snowy, or rainy. Despite the time or conditions people gather for a workout, a morning walk, a delicious snack, a visit, a hug, a memory, and a cause. I've been fortunate to be on the giving and receiving end of this event. Friends Helping Friends raised money to help fill Pioneer Memorial Therapy Services' new building with top-of-the-line equipment and tools to be able to provide PT, OT, and SLP services to our community. Ultimately, everyone that participates in the Remembrance Walk/5K Run both

gives and receives, as it provides everyone a place to gather, remember and celebrate our community."

The St. Patrick's Day Remembrance Walk/5K Run is a cherished tradition in our community. It not only commemorates those we have lost but also showcases the strength and unity of our community. By coming together, we honor the past while making a positive impact in the present. The registration and social hour for the event will take place on March 16th at 8:30 am at the Methodist Church in Heppner. The walk/run will start promptly at 9:30 am. Additionally, shirts for the event will be available for purchase at Flood Town Books on Main Street.

Before the walk/run begins, there is a social hour at 8:30 AM during registration. Attendees can enjoy a variety of food and hot drinks, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere for all participants. It provides an opportunity for people to mingle, connect, and share their own stories and experiences.



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