

# Tension continues over county ambulance services

—Continued from PAGE ONE

days of limbo on ambulance services is not 'soon,'" said Peterson, adding that he lives in the unincorporated part of Morrow County. "One hundred eighty days of having one ambulance in the south of Morrow County...is not good enough."

Lori Sietz of Lexington, who has been with the Morrow County Health District for more than 20 years with both the quick response team and the ambulance, urged the commissioners to sign the temporary contract with the health district.

"Please take time to fix this process," she urged.

Jodi Ferguson of Lexington told the commissioners that they were being advised by people who are not from Morrow County and have not lived here long enough to understand how the county's emergency medical services work on a daily basis.

"I'm disgusted with the time that has been allowed to be wasted on backup plans when this valuable time could have been spent negotiating with Morrow County Health District to come up with an agreement that is best for the residents of Morrow County," Ferguson said. "I hope you guys have a lot of money to spend on EMS services and wrongful death lawsuits."

Stuart Dick of Irrigon, a leader in the recall effort, addressed his comments to Morrow County Administrator Matthew Jensen, saying he had been addressing the BOC for the past year, but they weren't listening.

"No, it's a waste of time. They've got a pre-ordained agenda from the get-go," Dick said. "It's a hostile takeover."

"You inherited a wonderful system that worked for nearly 30 years," he added. "You came in and you ruined what these wonderful people had put together. You have never been honest about this."

Ray Akers of Boardman waved a folder, presumably containing recall petitions, when he addressed the commissioners. "If we have to fire all three of you guys to get rid of this mess, we're going to do it."

At the same time, he told the commissioners they should ask for Jensen's resignation immediately.

"Because you're not wanted. You're not wanted; you created this problem," he told Jensen, who took over as county administrator last August.

"Let's keep this civil," Sykes responded, telling Akers to keep to the issues. "Don't attack people."

"This isn't an attack," Akers responded. "You've attacked us. You've attacked our healthcare."

"You forced our hand, and the signatures are rolling," he added.

Andrea Fletcher stated that, despite public testimony urging the commissioners to do so, no effort had been made to reach out to health-related organizations in the county. Fletcher works with the Community Health Improvement Partnership (CHIP) of Morrow County, which is comprised of more than 25 multi-disciplinary partners within the county.

"These conversations would have provided vital and appropriately timely information throughout the past year for you to make informed decisions," Fletcher said. "Without talking to the very people with local expertise in the health field, it's extremely difficult to understand the provision of care for frontier and rural areas."

"There is no disputing the value of Boardman Fire Rescue," she added, "but this issue transcends one organization."

Kirsten Espinola of Ione, who works for the health district, said it shouldn't be a big deal for the county to sign a two-year contract if they truly intend to work with MCHD.

"All I am saying is, do you want your families, including mine, everybody in this community, to have to worry about something happening to them because you guys don't want to cooperate? To me, this is not okay," Espinola said.

## MCHD Funding Request

At the same time, the Morrow County Health District approached the county during the meeting with a request for \$800,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.

Morrow County Finance Director Kevin Ince said the health district had submitted the funding request to Morrow County to mitigate financial losses due to the economic impacts of COVID-19. Ince told the commissioners that county staff had met with MCHD staff to review the details of the request and that, based on the discussion in that meeting, the grant request would be an eligible use of the ARPA State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) funds.

MCHD Chief Operating Officer and Chief Financial Officer Nicole Mahoney asked the commissioners to set aside any differences with the health district over emergency medical services and consider the request on its own merits.

She said the funding request was for a primary care and emergency room subsidy for post-COVID fiscal recovery. Mahoney said the district's state and federal relief funding had ceased last year, but MCHD is still in fiscal recovery.

"We're daily making changes to our operations to not fill positions that are open, to combine light positions to cover four clinics instead of two, or to make changes in all the ways that we do business," she said.

Mahoney also said the district has been on a spending freeze since the fiscal year began, controlling spending where it can in order to operate \$600,000 under budget.

At the same time, she said, MCHD has been hard hit by areas out of their control, such as inflation and overruns in staffing costs. Some costs have doubled since pre-COVID. That has left the district with a \$2 million shortfall.

"So we're 1.6 down overall for six months of the year," she told the commissioners. "Our cost report last year came in a million two, so there will be a sizeable takeout of the that to that bottom line, but it will not eradicate all of it."

Mahoney added that the health district had never approached the county for funding during her time there and pointed out that, while it seemed like a large request in terms of the combined dollar amount, \$200,000 for the hospital and each of the three clinics was not a large request compared to other amounts already funded under the program.

Mahoney also said facilities and service lines are closing across the country, and MCHD is having to restructure the way it delivers care post-COVID.

"We're up against a

lot of...self-service health. You can get a pediatrician on the phone at midnight for 20 bucks instead of going to the ER. But we sought to staff the ER," she said, "with a physician that cost twice what it did pre-COVID."

"This is totally separate from the ambulance," Sykes agreed. "We want a healthy health district."

Morrow County Commissioner Jeff Wenzholz noted that a lot of the district's problems seemed to stem from the rise of telehealth and provider expenses. Mahoney agreed and added that utilization of brick-and-mortar primary care services is down across the county.

"And we do offer telehealth, but there's a lot of other, expanded telehealth that's available that wasn't there pre-COVID," she said. "And people are reprioritizing how they access it."

Mahoney said MCHD has seen telehealth emerge significantly in the past year.

"Specialists can run a business on cash and not have any staff in the building and can make a very good living providing telehealth services," said Mahoney. "In rural America where you have a limited populace, where you're trying to be available and provide services and be open, it literally is very challenging."

"This has not been something that we just said, 'Oh, this is a problem right now,'" she added. "It's something we've had our eye on it for very long time."

Wenzholz, however, questioned that based on what he said he had seen in the financials on MCHD's website.

"And I see, since 2019, your net position has increased every year, and in your audit, your auditors states that looking at your net position is a good way to look at the overall health of an organization, that if it's going up, then you're doing okay," he said, adding that the health district's operating revenue has gone up for the past several years.

"So, you know, when you say that the migration from brick and mortar, your financials don't bear that out," said Wenzholz.

"Not your audited financial statements that are on your website," he said when Mahoney objected. "Your audited statements don't show that you're having a decrease in business."

He did admit that the December financials showed that income had one down year-to-date, but questioned whether it had been ongoing for more than the past six months.

"I'm not saying that I'm not going to look at, you know, providing you some relief here, but I guess we also want to know, is this just a Band-Aid?" he said. "Where will we be in six months with the \$800,000?"

Mahoney replied that MCHD was aware it would only be a one-time contribution but that the district also has to plan ahead. She also pointed out that the increase in income didn't show the whole story when taking into account cost increases, and that district income is \$2 million below budget for the year.

"But you said that it's because of telehealth. And you said that's been going on for more than a year," said Wenzholz. "We have a difference of opinion."

Sykes asked Mahoney what the health district's

plan is moving forward. She replied that MCHD is assessing every possibility, including possible cuts to services, but that she wasn't ready to make a public statement on the plan for next year.

"We're just starting our budget process," she said.

The conversation took a contentious turn when Sykes asked if the ambulance service was really a money loser and whether that should be considered in MCHD's plans.

"Oh my God. What if you were to subsidize it like we'd ask for in service contracts?" Mahoney replied.

Mahoney said that, since the county started overhauling the ASA, MCHD personnel costs have gone up for EMS because none of their personnel want to work in Boardman.

"Do you know why? We pay overtime to people that work elsewhere to pick up shifts there because it's so...it's a hostile place to work," Mahoney said. "We've had to cut other places in order to meet this because of the BOC's decision to give uncertainty to people's jobs clear back in April. Ten months."

"So now you're going to try to hold this money hostage over the EMS situation?" she asked.

"No, no, no, no," put in Sykes. "It's completely separate. But you put your position out there, and so I think we should have a right to put our position out there. We would like the health district to continue. We would like you not to stop service on the twelfth. Would like you to keep doing it for 90 days until the ASA is back from Oregon Health and then we can negotiate a five-year contract with you."

"It's a five-year deal. That's what we want. We want just to keep going, no instability," he added.

"We gave you two years to figure it out," said Mahoney. "You need to keep these separate."

It took a few minutes to get the meeting back on topic, and the atmosphere in the room remained tense when Wenzholz again raised his concerns. He said a lot of people have been talking about transparency, but he had been unable to find a detailed accounts payable ledger on the health district website.

"I'll use as an example, we list Morrow County Grain Growers as a vendor, and may say: equipment, two 31 wiper blades for this dollar amount, and it's built into this department," Wenzholz said. "Does the health district provide an AP ledger like that?"

Mahoney replied that the MCHD ledger wasn't that detailed, but that they could provide the information by public request.

"So, would the health district be willing to provide that for 36 months and then, you know, we can see where your dollars have been going," Wenzholz said.

"What exactly are you looking for in the AP ledger?" asked Mahoney.

"To see that the expenses are where you say they are," Wenzholz replied.

"You're challenging our work that's been done every year?" asked Mahoney.

"Is there a reason you don't want to give it?" Sykes asked.

"I'm happy to give it. I'm wondering why you're asking for it," Mahoney replied. "Is there an allegation that we've been misappropriating funds?"

Mahoney said the

county had never asked those questions concerning other funding requests, and again stated that \$200,000 per facility was not a huge request.

"If you want to look at our records from financial standpoint, then make a public records request. That shouldn't be tied to this ARPA request," she said.

Wenzholz said he understood people had done that and that records weren't available or would cost \$250. Mahoney replied that the health district is allowed to charge a fee if someone wants something not regularly available.

Morrow County Commissioner Roy Drago asked if the funding would be considered a lump sum or if it was certain that \$200,000 would be expended to each location. Mahoney said the money would definitely go to the four locations.

Sykes made a motion to grant the request contingent on the health district supplying accounts payable, but the motion died for lack of a second. Drago moved to table the request until the county receives an account payable summary from the health district. The motion passed unanimously.

## Interim Ambulance Services

The tension in the air didn't clear with the next item on the agenda, as Jensen presented a draft contract for interim ambulance services with Boardman Fire Rescue.

Jensen said that, while the county is in discussions with Morrow County Health District, it is still working on interim options in case they fail to come to an agreement before the health district's 90-day deadline expires.

"This is the biggest part of it, the contract for ambulance provisioning," Jensen said.

Jensen said he was not asking for approval or signatures. The contract would also be presented to BFRD at a special meeting the district had scheduled last Wednesday evening.

According to the contract, BFRD would provide interim ambulance response for up to 90 days, with an additional 90-day extension possible. BFRD currently has four Advanced Life Support-capable ambulances and says it is capable of providing appropriate staffing.

To fully cover the county, however, BFRD would need access to three additional ambulances. Since

it is an interim agreement, BFRD asked that the county provide those through a short-term lease.

Two ambulances would be stationed in each of the three planned ASA areas—Boardman, Irrigon and South County—with one staffed for response 24/7 in each area. BFRD plans to utilize either a 48-hour or 72-hour shift process during interim coverage.

"Some people are under the illusion that all the ambulances are going to be coming up from Boardman. That's not the case," said Jensen.

Possible South County locations have yet to be finalized, but options include the Morrow County Fairgrounds or the public works location in Lexington.

"Again, we're still working with Morrow County Health District on possible solutions. And we are awaiting word from OHA on the ASA and we'll be expediting that as soon as we receive word on that," Jensen said. "So the contract is set up for up to 90 days, to expire as soon as we have an opportunity to set up and implement the new ASA."

"And so this is a contingency plan, and will provide ambulance service throughout the county," he added.

According to the contract, BFRD would charge \$3,975 per day for proposed interim coverage plus a 10 percent administrative fee for billed reimbursements. The county will pay for the three leased AMR ambulances and will receive the billed reimbursement, minus the administrative fee, for all calls in the Northeast (Irrigon) and South ASA. BFRD would retain billable reimbursement for North ASA (Boardman) calls.

The BOC voted unanimously to authorize the county administrator to sign the contract if BFRD made no changes.

After another comment from the audience, Sykes asked the people in the room to be respectful.

"A lot of you, you're on city councils, and I don't think you appreciate the public making comments throughout your meeting," he said. "We've got city council people here, we've got health district board members and work people, and I don't think you appreciate people yelling from the audience at you. I would ask you to please not do that. Please."

## Births

Send birth announcements to editor@rapidsolve.net or upload to Heppner.net.

# Waites and DuBrys welcome new baby



## Pheobe Ann Waite

On February 16th, 2024, Leo Waite and Stephany DuBry of Provo, Utah, joyfully welcomed baby Pheobe Ann Waite into their family. Weighing 7.5 lbs and measuring 19 inches,

this addition is a bundle of joy for the proud parents. Leo's parents, Deiter and Bridget Waite, and Stephany's parents, Chet and Starla DuBry, are overjoyed with the arrival of their new granddaughter.

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