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The Loop unveils new fixed bus routes in Morrow County



(L-R) Transit operations manager Patrick Keely, Sheriff John Bowles, Commissioner David Sykes, JOP Glen Diehl, County Administrator Matt Jensen, and Transit manager Ben Tucker, cutting the ribbon at the Loop ceremony. -Photo by Annalynn Black

By Annalynn Black

The Loop, an on-demand transit service, recently celebrated the launch of its new fixed bus routes in Morrow County with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on April 1st. The event took place at the city park in Heppner and marked the introduction of three new routes: the green route from Heppner to Boardman, the blue route from Boardman to Heppner, and the red route that loops around Boardman and the Port of Morrow.

A number of key individuals were present at the ribbon-cutting event, including Patrick Keely, the Loop's transit operations Supervisor, Ben Tucker the Loop Transit Manager, County Commissioner David Sykes, County Administrator Matt Jensen, Justice of the Peace Glen Diehl, and Sheriff John Bowles. Other attendees included John Doherty the Heppner City Manager, Madison Rosenbalm from

the Heppner Chamber of Commerce, and Lindsay Grogan with the County. The loop also had drivers and dispatchers attend, Marytza Prado Reytez Dispatcher, Audrey Durfey bus driver, Joe Shelley the Loop on demand driver, and Cage Keely dressed up as a comical cow for this event.

The ceremony commenced with Commissioner Dave Sykes expressing gratitude to their partners, ODOT and Kayak Transit, followed by the ribbon cutting, and ended with a courtesy ride to showcase the stops along the Heppner route. The buses utilized in the new fixed route system are equipped with ASA standard wheelchair operators and offer ample space for bicycles, strollers, and other belongings. Additionally, a pull string runs along both sides of the bus to allow passengers to request stops as needed.

The discussion about implementing a fixed route bus system for South and



Gage Keely, dressed up as a cow for the ribbon cutting ceremony. -Photo by Annalynn Black

North Morrow County began some time ago, and Transit Manager Ben Tucker said, "We are picking up the pieces and getting the ball rolling." The buses, which were funded by Morrow County, consist of three routes. The Blue route starts at 7 am in Boardman and ends at 9:15 am in Heppner, with a repeat schedule at 7 pm. The Green route begins at 4:45 am in Heppner, loops through Lexington and Ione, and concludes at 6:45 am in Boardman. This route repeats at 10:30 am and 12:15 am. The Red route runs from 1:15 pm to 1:57 pm in Boardman, with additional trips at 3:15 pm, 4:15 pm, and 6:15 pm.

Transit Operations Manager Patrick Keely explained that passengers with ASA access issues can be picked up within a 3/4th mile radius from the designated bus stop if they call ahead of time. The Loop currently employs five full-time dispatchers and four drivers, with plans to hire

one more person. The main objective of the new route system is to connect North and South Morrow County. Keely also mentioned that ODOT has been instrumental in securing and maintaining state and federal grants for the operation and acquisition of equipment, with Kayak serving as the local transit provider to ensure access to public transit for all Morrow County residents. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the new bus route is not sponsored by any private entities.

The Loop administrators have established strong relationships with the Port of Morrow and the Boardman Chamber of Commerce. They have collaborated with various entities and community representatives from all the cities in Morrow County to develop the routes based on extensive studies and local input. Initially, the feedback indicated a need for more stops in Boardman, resulting in the doubling in size of the red route map. Additionally, the administrators aimed to facilitate a hassle-free commute for those working at the Port of Morrow. For the north end, the number of stops is limited due to the smaller size and capacity of towns like Lexington, Ione, and Heppner. It is important to note that the "Dial-A-Ride" car service and the weekly shopper bus will continue to operate alongside the new fixed route system.

Egg-cellent ex-travaganza! Heppner kids go hopping mad for easter egg hunts!

By Chris Sykes

On Easter Saturday, Market Fresh and the Elks Lodge in Heppner organized exciting Easter egg hunts for children. The first hunt kicked off at 8am in Market Fresh, where kids eagerly formed a line down the aisle, anticipating the opportunity to find a plethora of eggs. Following this, at 9am, the second hunt took place at the Heppner Fair Grounds, providing even more excitement for the kids. In addition to the egg hunts, the Elks Lodge arranged a special Easter Bunny photo session, allowing parents to capture moments with their kids. For more images of the Easter egg hunts, flip over to page seven.



Berkley Hanna proudly displayed her impressive egg collection from Market Fresh on Saturday. - Photo By Chris Sykes

Men's golf opening day April 7th



Entrance to the Willow Creek Country Club. - Photo by Chris Sykes

The Willow Creek men will open their 2024 season on Sunday April 7th at the Willow Creek Country Club. The day will start with breakfast at 7:30 and play will begin around 8:30. The event will be a blind draw

2-man scramble. The board asks you to remember to have dues paid by this time. Wednesday night play will begin on April 17th. There is a sign-up sheet posted in the clubhouse. Hope to see you all on Sunday.

Trout stocking schedule for Willow Creek



Northeast Oregon – With spring getting underway, ODFW are stepping up their trout stocking schedule. For April, 13,000 legals and 1200 trophies are bound for 13 waterbodies across the Northeast Oregon District, for a total of 14,200 fish. For reference, the Northeast Oregon District comprises the entirety of Gillam, Morrow, and Umatilla counties, the majority of Wheeler, Grant, Union, and Wallowa Counties, along with portions of Sherman, Wasco, Jeffer-

son, and Harney counties. The April trout stocking schedule, including zone and number of fish, is as follows:
Date: April 1 – April 5
Waterbody: Willow Creek Office: John Day
Legals: 500
Trophy: 0
Total: 500
Date: April 1 – April
Waterbody: Willow Creek Reservoir Office: John Day
Legals: 0
Trophy: 750
Total: 750

New allegations emerge beyond original BOC recall petition

By Chris Sykes

Recently, in February, Stewart Dick filed a recall petition against three Morrow County Commissioners: Jeff Wenholtz, Roy Drago, and David Sykes. In his petition, he listed five reasons for the recall. Stewart recently posted on the Morrow County Citizens for Liberty and Justice Facebook page. Dick added a new reason to the recall list, accusing Retired Commissioner Don Russell of orchestrating a 'lynch mob' against Lindsay and Doherty. Dick stated, "...Commissioner Russell orchestrated the lynch mob against Lindsay and Doherty. That disgraceful manipulated recall is a main reason for this BOC recall. And trust me, it will happen."

Dick then posted a response to a claim that the recall was motivated by revenge. He stated, "This recall has nothing to do with revenge. If it was purely about revenge, I wouldn't have gone to the efforts of holding five public meetings in all five cities of Morrow County, trying to find a solution with our Board of Commissioners. This recall is about standing up for liberty and justice, and seeking to correct a case

of mis-justice that Jim and Missy have faced."

The Heppner Gazette contacted the three current commissioners, as well as retired commissioner Russell, to seek clarification regarding his statement and inquire about their involvement in the last recall.

Retired Commissioner Don Russell denies having anything to do with the last recall, saying, "Stuart Dick's post was pointed out to me by a friend. I'm retired now and I try not to be involved. I had my turn to be involved when I was commissioner. I can tell you that I didn't make any phone calls organizing people and didn't go to any meetings about the recall. I didn't gather signatures for the recall or call people and encourage them to sign petitions. I'm aware of some of the people who gathered signatures and none of them are related to me or, as far as I know, associated with corporate farms or any industry at the Port of Morrow."

Commissioner Drago said, "Stewart has been claiming there is no transparency from the county and here he is not being transparent with his intentions. It's very telling about hypocrisy. I want to ignore the rhetoric and do my job

for the people of Morrow County."

"There is irony over Stuart Dick's admission, the true reason for this recall is his need for vengeance over the last recall," said David Sykes, Chair of the Morrow County Commission. "The most contentious issues he is using against us are both tough problems we inherited from the previous administration. Instead of taking on these tough issues, the previous commissioners chose to delay and stall any decisions that needed to be made. The previous administrators had two years to deal with the ambulance issue but refused. Previous commissioners should have sited the new circuit court building by the time they left office, but instead, once again they refused to deal with the hard decisions their office required. A decision on siting the new circuit court building was put off for so long, by the time Jeff Wenholtz and I took office, the county was on the verge of losing state funding for the building. "With Stuart Dick's revelation of the true reason behind the current recall effort, I would urge all Morrow County residents to give us time to work through these issues," Sykes continued. "We are

dealing with these matters openly and honestly. Do not be part of one man's personal lust for vengeance over the past."

Commissioner Wenholtz said, "Jim Doherty told me in 2022 that there would be a recall against me and that was before I was a commissioner. So, I knew the real motivation behind the recall."

The five reasons listed on the current recall petition are.

1) The three Morrow County Commissioners (BOC) have been uncooperative and lacking transparency when it comes to working with the Morrow

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