

WRANGLERS 5/19/24 County holds town hall meetings about circuit court site

PLAYDAY RESULTS

STICK-HORSE RACE	Price Hines 58.701
3 & Under	Pierce Miller 60.878
Sheldon Milligan	Lil Wranglers 8-11-Year-olds
Sawyer Ham	Karter Jo Hines 26.993
Maverick Rhea	EllieGene Fenner 27.037
Aydan Walton	Pearl Miller 36.349
4 & 5 Yr. Olds	Lydia Knowles 38.149
Rune Armstrong	Junior Wranglers
Oakley Bergstrom	12-15-Year-olds
Iris Armstrong	KC Anderson 23.938+
Blaney Jo Milligan	Brooklyn Hendricks
6- & 7-Year-olds	27.395
Lotus Armstrong	Catherine Lindsay 28.931
Barrels	Ashlee Knutz 34.657
Lead-line	Senior Wranglers
Trell Knowles 39.311	Saige Jensen 27.174
Maverick Rhea 43.198	Scurry Race
Rune Armstrong 50.419	Lead-Line
Olivia Wood 52.409	Blaney Jo Milligan
Peewee Wranglers	34.594
Pierce Miller 57.357	Lotus Armstrong 37.513
Lil Wranglers 8 - 11 Yr. Olds	Maverick Rhea 38.255
Lydia Knowles 22.312	Iris Armstrong 39.195
Karter Jo Hines 23.297	Peewee Wranglers
EllieGene Fenner 24.842	Price Hines 27.483
Morgan Milligan 26.771	Pierce Miller 35.128
Junior Wranglers 12 - 15-Year-olds	Lil Wranglers 8-11-year-olds
KC Anderson 20.073	Morgan Milligan
Brooklyn Hendricks	18.188
22.789	Karter Jo Hines 18.534
Ashlee Knutz 23.204	EllieGene Fenner 29.284
Catherine Lindsay 23.467	Pearl Miller 29.646
Senior Wranglers 16+	Junior Wranglers
Saige Jensen 21.050	12-15-year-olds
Poles	Brooklyn Hendricks
Lead-line	16.420
Trell Knowles 52.413	Catherine Lindsay 19.653
Maverick Rhea 60.592	KC Anderson 20.401
Rune Armstrong 66.047	Ashlee Knutz 24.194
Lotus Armstrong 71.397	Senior Wranglers
Peewee	Saige Jensen 42.435

By Andrea Di Salvo

The Morrow County Board of Commissioners held two town hall meetings regarding the planned new circuit court building last week. The public meetings in Heppner and Irrigon on May 15 were a step toward fulfilling an earlier promise the BOC had made to engage Morrow County citizens more in the project. The site selected last year, near the Morrow County Fairgrounds and Heppner Elementary School, has proven controversial. However, the county has stood by the site selection, saying it interpreted the Oregon Revised Statute to require that the court building be inside the Heppner City Limits. The fairgrounds site, commissioners and staff said, was the best site within that limitation.

However, public outreach resulted in a letter from Judicial District 6 Presiding Judge Daniel Hill several weeks ago, which allowed the county to look outside the city limits for a suitable courthouse site.

Following that letter, the board of commissioners again expanded its search, which has since narrowed to three sites—the fairgrounds site, the old Kinzua Mill site outside of Heppner, on land owned by the Port of Morrow, and a 2.85-acre site at Columbia Ave. NW and Olson Rd. in Boardman.

Morrow County Administrator Matthew Jensen told the gathered citizens that the search for the courthouse needed to meet several criteria. First and foremost, it needs to meet the Oregon Judicial Department's standards for "reasonable and sufficient" court facilities.

The site also needs to avoid potential hazards such as flood zones, be accessible to the public, connect to city-provided utilities, and be a minimum of two acres of buildable land for a 24,000-square-foot building and 123 parking stalls.

Two of those sites seem to fit the bill. The Kinzua Mill site, though, raises some concerns about water, sewer, and related costs. Jensen said the Port of Morrow has offered to donate the acres and has talked about doing some of the groundwork to get the site ready.

Neither the Port nor the City of Heppner have committed to any financial contribution toward infrastructure.

"But there's expenses," said Jensen. "If we were to go to that site, there's really got to be some conversations of, 'We're going to take this and move it forward and be a key component on getting everything taken care of.'"

The biggest expense seems to be water—or the lack of it.

Both the fairgrounds and Boardman sites have city utilities, so the cost of water and sewer would fit within the project's base budget. The mill site has no water or sewer, so would add an additional \$1,945,000 to \$2,910,000

to the project cost.

While putting in a sewer and water system for the courthouse is an option, Jensen said he didn't think it was the best option, since it did nothing to promote further development at the mill site.

The other option is to lay more than a mile of pipes and connect to Heppner City water. That will cost about \$100 per foot, or between \$895,000 and \$1,165,000. That doesn't address the sewer, which would cost even more with the need for lift stations or pressure systems.

According to the county's consultant, that could be a 12-month project on its own, and Morrow County Board of Commissioners Chair David Sykes reminded those present that "time is money" for the taxpayers.

"The longer this takes, the longer it drags out, the more the cost," said Sykes.

On top of that, the county put forth the possibility of "unknown" costs for each of the sites. Such costs could result from environmental surveys and geotechnical exploration, among others.

As for the Boardman site, Jensen said it was still an option because of the court caseload in Morrow County. About 80 percent of the caseload is located in the north end of the county, he said, reflecting the denser population in the Boardman and Irrigon areas.

Jensen said that, while there was great historical value in having the courthouse tied to Heppner, it did create difficulties when it came to tasks like putting together juries.

Morrow County Commissioner Roy Drago said he wants to see the courthouse remain in Heppner, but also said it was a preference partly based on emo-

tion rather than practicality.

"I also want a Corvette," Drago said. "There's a lot more to it than where I want it to be and what I want."

"We have unknowns with the Kinzua Mill site. I think it would be a great place for it, but I'm scared," Drago added. "I don't want to have this thing start and then realize we got ourselves in way over our heads."

Despite the drawbacks, however, the mill site seems to be the most popular with many Morrow County voters. While some residents at the Irrigon meeting urged careful fiscal responsibility, several who spoke seemed in favor of pushing forward with the Heppner industrial site.

Irrigon resident Stuart Dick, who is spearheading a recall effort against the three commissioners, told the board that the mill site offers a "priceless opportunity."

"It's a hundred acres of the only industrial land on the south end," said Dick. "Either it gets done now, or it's never going to get done."

"There's an opportunity for it right now, there's money for it right now, there's an opportunity for partnership right now," Dick added. "This could be one of the greatest moves that Morrow County has ever made, and it has to happen now."

Dick also added that more industrial opportunity on the south end could change the 80-20 population split Jensen had mentioned earlier.

"What better time for you guys to be the heroes and champion this project?" added Jodi Ferguson of Lexington.

Port of Morrow Commissioner and Boardman-area resident Kelly

Doherty added that, while they had discussed finances and unknowns, no one had discussed the economic value of putting the courthouse at the mill site.

"There's got to be a great economic value to keeping that courthouse in Heppner," Doherty said. "An economic value to the Port of Morrow to develop that site. I think those are considerations that we need to look at, as well."

Sykes asked if Doherty thought the rest of the county would support the added cost of the mill site.

"Do you think the rest of the citizens of Morrow County are willing to spend county dollars to make that happen in Heppner at the mill site?" he asked.

Doherty pointed out that people currently have to drive to Heppner for court, and that taking the courthouse out of Heppner would be an economic blow to the city.

"You're going to have a wash. You're going to take away from them and give to another," she said. "Consider the economic gain that the Port of Morrow could have."

An Irrigon resident seemed to disagree.

"Kelly [Doherty] says she's concerned with the economic wellbeing of Heppner. Well, I'm concerned with the economic well-being of the whole county, and I ask that you guys be concerned the same," the man said.

At the same time, another Irrigon man said he didn't want the courthouse in Irrigon, saying the small town has already grown too much.

"Heppner sounds like a terrific area, and the mill site sounds even better," he said. "I'm just speaking as a county member, give it to the mill site."

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