

~ Letters to the Editor ~

The Heppner Gazette Times will print all letters to the Editor with the following criteria met: letters submitted to the newspaper will need to have the name of the sender along with a legible signature. We are also requesting that you provide your address and a phone number where you can be reached. The address and phone number will only be used for verification and will not be printed in the newspaper. Letters may not be libelous. The GT reserves the right to edit. The GT is not responsible for accuracy of statements made in letters. Any letters expressing thanks will be placed in the classifieds under "Card of Thanks" at a cost of \$15 Email to editor@rapidsolve.net or upload to Heppner.net.

Commissioners work hard on difficult issues

I am writing this letter to address the complaints listed against the Morrow County Board of Commissioners (BOC) as the reasons for the recall. Many of the issues listed are items that we as the current BOC inherited when we took office in 2023. I am proud to say that we have tackled these often-contentious issues head-on and we are addressing them following State laws and regulations and not bowing to political/peer pressure. We have been committed to following the law and legal processes and being prudent with taxpayer dollars.

Regarding the Ambulance Service Area Plan (ASA), under Oregon state law, the county has ultimate responsibility for ambulance service in the county. The law also states that the ASA is to be updated every five years. For one reason or another, the ASA had not been updated since 1998. In 2021 the previous BOC sent a draft ASA to the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) for approval. The OHA then sent back a modified version of the ASA that the County had submitted. At no time did the County through the Board of Commissioners adopt this modified version of the ASA and implement it with a new ordinance. So, when we, the current Board of Commissioners, took office we set out to draft a new ASA, at the advice of our legal counsel, that met state laws and adopt and implement this new ASA. At no time did we tell the Morrow County Health District (Health District) that they could not provide ambulance services for Morrow County. The Health District is the entity that decided that they were not going to provide ambulance services for Morrow County after March 12, 2024. The BOC met multiple times with the Health District to come up with a plan for the Health District to provide ambulance services past March 12, but we were unable to come to agreement on a mutually agreed upon plan. So that is how we got to where we are today with the Boardman Fire Rescue District providing ambulance services on an interim basis until the new ASA is fully implemented and contracts are signed with the ambulance provider or providers. The allegations that the BOC has not been transparent or taking input on this issue are just false. Every time we have discussed this it has been on the agenda, and we have taken public comment. Last year we held multiple public listening sessions on this very topic. From the beginning, we have said we were going to draft a new ASA, (again at the advice of our lawyer), and follow the state laws and regulations for adopting and implementing an ASA. Throughout the process, the Health District has been involved and consulted on the formulation of the new ASA. Granted, this has been a much longer process than any of us would have wanted but we wanted to be sure we were doing this in a legal manner.

The next complaint listed against us concerns the location of the Circuit Court building. Again, this is an issue that

predates the current BOC. The previous BOC in consultation with the Oregon State Court system had done a review of the current facilities for the Circuit Court and they concluded that the current facilities did not meet the State standards for a Circuit Court facility. The study determined that a new building was needed for the Circuit Court. The previous BOC started the process and submitted applications for state funding to construct a new Circuit Court building. After we took office in 2023 Chair Sykes, District Attorney Justin Nelson and others went to Salem to give testimony to secure funding from the State for the new Circuit Court building. Even before the funding was secured, there was a building site committee with County employees and Chair Sykes that met and worked with the City of Heppner to identify sites in Heppner to locate this new building. The city came back with a list that was then narrowed down to four sites, by the building site committee, for the BOC to consider. When looking to see where to locate the new Circuit Court building, the BOC was following Oregon Revised Statute 3.016 which says that the Circuit Court will be held in Heppner. Of the four sites presented to the BOC for consideration, only one fulfilled the requirements that the lot had to be in the city of Heppner, was large enough to site the size of the building needed, have enough parking space, and not be in a floodplain. The site next to the fairgrounds fulfilled all these requirements and the County already owns the property. So, trying to be prudent and good stewards of taxpayer dollars we selected the property next to the fairgrounds. The other sites considered were either too small, in the floodplain, had buildings on them already or a combination of those factors. It was not until after we received pushback on our site selection that the Oregon Chief Justice issued an opinion that the Circuit Court building did not have to be in the city of Heppner. It only needs to be in Morrow County. Upon learning this we have since looked at other sites for the new Circuit Court building. Up to the point of us receiving the opinion that the building does not have to be in the city of Heppner, we were following what the Oregon Revised Statute says and trying to be fiscally responsible. Again, to accuse of not taking input on this topic is false. The list of sites for consideration was compiled with the help of officials/citizens of the city of Heppner, there have been town halls held on this subject, and our Administrator, Matt, has met with those groups and individuals that have expressed concerns about the location next to the fairgrounds,

The next complaint that we are lowering our workload by only meeting twice a month is another one that is not true. While it is true that we are only meeting twice a month for normal Board meetings, those meetings are lasting longer than they used to when the BOC met four times per month. The

number of hours spent at BOC meetings is comparable to the time spent by the prior BOC when they met four times per month. We still have our normal committee assignments and other meetings to attend. Meeting twice a month is a financial savings for the County through efficiencies such as half the meeting notices, meeting agendas, meeting packets, minutes, and meeting setup are required of the Executive Assistant, half the legal notices of meetings to be held have to be published in the newspaper and savings of staff time and fuel traveling to meetings.

Next, the nitrate issue of the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area (LUB-GWMA). This is an issue that has been known about since 1990 when the LUB-GWMA was designated. This is an issue that did not occur overnight and will not be solved overnight. To say that we have not done anything to address this issue is also not true. During our term in office, we have made sure that those with high nitrate levels have access to clean drinking water. We have also secured \$1.7 million in Federal money for Phase 1 that is to be used in Morrow and Umatilla County to test wells and gather data on those wells to help identify possible solutions to address those wells that test high for nitrates. We have also been granted \$1.32 million in Federal money for Phase 2 in Morrow County to do some engineering work on those possible solutions identified in Phase 1. As stated earlier, this is not something that will be solved overnight. We are working on this and following the steps needed and dictated by the funding that we receive. We also want to be sure that any solutions identified are the right choice.

The last complaint listed against the BOC has to do with the tax abatement programs for Amazon. First of all, Amazon is not the only company that has gotten an Enterprise Zone agreement. Morrow County Grain Growers, Lamb Weston, Tillamook, and RDO Farms have all been recipients of tax abatement through the Enterprise Zone. To say that tax abatement programs are unnecessary is not accepting the reality of the business envi-

ronment in which we live. Businesses have options of where they choose to locate and make investments. To single out Amazon is unfair, without those programs, Amazon most likely would not be in Morrow County so Morrow County would not be a beneficiary of the \$21.3 million that Amazon paid in property taxes in 2023. That amount is more than the other 19 of the top 20 taxpayers in Morrow County combined. The \$21.3 million is property taxes only and does not include the about \$12 million they paid in Enterprise Zone fees last year. I do find it puzzling that this BOC is criticized for "bad deals" when only two of the seven data center sites that are under construction/operating were approved by this BOC and these two sites will be having to pay for any bonds that are passed for education or public safety and the previous five sites are exempt from any bonds. This seems like this BOC did a better job of negotiating than the previous Boards did.

So, in summary, I would say this Board of Commissioners has taken on several hard/contentious issues that were there when we took office and has constantly worked to solve these issues in a legal, open, and fiscally responsible matter. If you ever have any questions, please feel free to contact any of us. Our contact details can be found on the County's website: co.morrow.or.us.

Jeff Wenzholz
Morrow County Commissioner

WCCC Men's Club

Sixteen participated in the men's play on Sunday, May 16th, at Willow Creek Country Club. The results are as follows:

Net 1st /2nd tie Delbert Binschus-Tom Shear 61 3rd Jerry Gentry 62
Gross

1st/2nd tie Aaron Mason-Dennis Peck 67
3rd Derek Gunderson 69

The next men's play will be on June 23rd. Jerry Gentry, Willy Gentry, and Rick Johnston will be hosting.

New parking signs at City Hall



The new parking sign in front of City Hall. -Photo by Cindi Doherty.

According to City Manager John Doherty, new parking signs were installed outside of Heppner City Hall in May. The

sign reads "Reserved Parking for City Hall Visitors 30-minute wait limit Monday-Friday 8am-5pm. Unauthorized vehicles towed away." Doherty explained to a reporter from the Gazette that the enforcement of no parking was necessary due to people leaving their cars parked in front all day while working at nearby businesses. This caused inconvenience for individuals who needed the parking to carry out tasks such as paying their water bill at City Hall, forcing them to park further down the street. He also mentions Main Street has already has a time limit of off-street parking of two hours, Doherty stated that "we got tired of it."

The best family-friendly Fourth of July is in Ione

Escape the city lights and head to Ione, Oregon for a small-town celebration this Fourth of July. The day starts early with a Fun Run/Walk at 7am and a hearty Fireman's breakfast from 78am-10am. There is a parade that starts at 1pm and other events throughout the day include Bingo, a classic car show, a fish-pond, and a talent show at 4:30pm, which is open to anyone interested.

We are excited to bring back games from Knocker ball Tri-Cities. These will be free for all and will include laser tag, putt putt golf, soccer dart board, connect four and axe throwing. Free face painting and glitter tattoos will be available in the park by artist Laurie Ellis.

Food vendors will also be part of the festivities. Live music will kick off at 2pm with upbeat blues by Luke Basil. At 3:30pm ZG3- the Zax Grooms trio will bring some down to

earth county. The Frog Hollow Band, who have opened for national music acts like Sarah Evans and Dan+Shay, will take the stage around 6:30pm. Heading the 2024 celebration will be River Divide, who will bring you high energy hits of today as well as classic country, pop and rock tracks from yesterday.

Thanks to a grant from Morrow County Unified Recreation District, the concert is free; just be sure to bring a lawn chair or blankets as seating is not provided. All this family fun builds up to a firework spectacular, shot from the hill overlooking the small town. Set up your spot in the city park and spend the whole day right there with a great view of the exciting fireworks show.

Visitors of all ages are welcome. Dogs will not be allowed in the park. For more details find us on Facebook at facebook.com/ione4thofjuly.

HCMD to hold meeting June 24th

The Heppner Cemetery Maintenance District will hold their monthly meeting on Tuesday, June 24, 2024. The regular meeting will be held at 5:15 p.m. Agenda items include minutes of previous meeting, financial report & Cemetery Operations. The meeting will

be held at the Ag Service Building conference room at 430 W Linden Way. Meetings of the Heppner Cemetery Maintenance District are open to the public according to ORS 192.640(1). For questions, contact Janet Greenup at 541-561-6768.

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This single family home, spanning 1641 square feet, boasts a spacious dining room and living room along with a family room 3 bedrooms, 1.5 bathrooms and lots of storage. Situated in a peaceful neighborhood, it is conveniently located close to the swimming pool, high school, baseball park, and downtown area. The property sits on a large lot with street access, with lots of parking and also features a shop. Large covered deck, patio and a carport. The total land area is 0.25 Acres. MLS#: 23224220

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