

# County entities give updates, discuss cooperation

By Andrea Di Salvo

Representatives of Morrow County, the Port of Morrow and the five municipalities of Heppner, Lexington, Ione, Irrigon and Boardman shared just a few of the good things happening in the county at a city-county-port meeting held July 30 in Heppner.

Top of mind for many seemed to be creating cooperation and unity out of the political turbulence that has troubled Morrow County for the past few years.

Irrigon City Manager Aaron Palmquist led the way when he suggested that all the entities come to the next quarterly meeting with ideas for a long-term scheduled plan that would allow for better cooperation among the county governments.

"I think we need to learn to plan if we're going to be leaders," he said, adding that it applied to everything from capital projects to bonds.

"A whole bunch of us as separate jurisdictions go out and put things out there for 'taxing,'" he said, "but nobody coordinates. And guess what we get? Goose egg."

"If you know that you want something, let's get it on there so it's not a 'Hey, you,' kind of thing because there's a lot of lift and there's a lot going on."

He also pointed out that Columbia River Enterprise Zone (CREZ) III sunsets soon and said he would like to see the county and Port develop set plans and procedures before CREZ IV begins.

"We need to have something so there's consistency," he said. "I'd like to see some policies and procedures that cleans up a lot of the—I'll be very clear—rancor that we have going on across our county," Palmquist said.

Boardman Mayor Paul Keefer echoed a similar sentiment when he asked how city leaders could put aside differences and work together going forward, specifically regarding Ambulance Service Area contracts currently under negotiation between Morrow County and Morrow County Health District.

"How do we get past this?" he asked. "How do we get to help, be supportive? How do we be supportive to get the county to be able to get an agreement?"

"Time's running out," he added. "I don't have the answer to that, but there's a lot of smart people here who can help make that happen."

Heppner Mayor Corey Sweeney said he felt that round table discussions like the city-county-port meeting went a long way toward that.

"And when we can reach out to people in our neck of the woods and we can explain and we can be informed and we can combat some stuff—false information and misleading information—I think that goes a long way to squelch a lot of the noise that some sides create," Sweeney said.

Aside from discussion for the good of the order, each entity also gave an update on recent happenings in its jurisdiction.

## Morrow County

In the county update, Morrow County Board of Commissioners Chair David Sykes said the Intergovernmental Agreements (IGAs) have been pulled from the Ambulance Service Area (ASA) provider contract being negotiated with the health district.

"So we're closing in on that, I think," said Sykes.

He also said the county is researching the site of the old Kinzua Mill for the new circuit court building. The geotechnical surveys are being analyzed, and the results should be in soon.

"That will tell us the story on that site down there," he said.

Sykes said the testing was done in the southeast portion of the mill site.

Sykes, who is also the CREZ interim manager, also reported that the enterprise zone received a boundary extension down in the Lexington area.

"That was pretty exciting," he said. "We've got a little piece of enterprise zone down here in south county now."

He also reported that zoning was approved for the new data center going in on Tower Road in Boardman.

The new 10,000-acre solar farm south of Bombing Range is still in progress, with an Energy Facility Siting Council hearing planned later this month. Part of the proposed contract is around \$11 million in mitigation for building on farm ground. A committee within Morrow County would determine how the money would be spent, said Sykes.

"The mitigation fund is a new concept that hasn't been used," Sykes said.

Another 5,000-acre solar farm is also being planned near there.

Roy Drago Jr. gave an update on the wildfire situation. Oregon has the largest wildfires in the nation, with about one million acres affected so far, Drago said.

"So far Morrow County's south end from west to east is all on fire right now," Drago said. "Lots of fires out there and lots of people working hard, lots of hours, and hopefully they stay safe."

The fire came within five miles of the Morrow County OHV Park, but so far, the park has not been affected aside from smoke issues. Only one structure has burned in Morrow County, and that was apparently an outbuilding.

Drago reported that he would be at a meeting to learn about securing FEMA funding to help with the fires. He also said a lot of help is coming from Australia and New Zealand, since it is off-season for firefighters there.

## Port of Morrow

Port of Morrow Executive Director Lisa Mittelsdorf said the SAGE Center expansion is nearing completion. A delay in some materials has pushed back the grand opening date, originally planned for the first of October. They have also hired a new event coordinator.

"It's going to be a beautiful facility," she said.

She said they opened Marine Drive for the Fourth of July but then closed it again. They are still waiting for guard rails for the east end of the road.

"That's a safety issue, so we put the barriers back up," she said.

Port Chief Operations Officer Mark Patton said the job for the two wastewater lagoons has been awarded, and the contractor should be on-site within 30 days to start on pond three. They will move on to the pond four lagoons in the spring. They expect to have the project completed by September 2025.

They are also moving forward on the farm five expansion of an additional

750 acres.

The Port's secondary treatment is still under review by the design group but had come in "way over budget" at about \$40 million. Patton said they are also working with the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) on the design.

Patton also said the airport is being paved, with four and a half miles of new road. He said it should be complete within about two weeks. A water infrastructure project is also underway at the airport.

GSI is working with DEQ on flood mitigation at the Port's Heppner site.

"We never did get a clean bill of health on environmental cleanup there," Patton said, adding that about 99.9 percent of the work was done.

He said the next step will be to dig test holes and get a report to DEQ so the department will hopefully allow the Port to move forward on flood mitigation. He said the process is moving slowly but he hopes to get through it in the next couple of months.

## Columbia Development Authority

Included in the POM report was an update on the Columbia Development Authority. Port commissioner Kelly Doherty, who is the Port's representative on the CDA, said the CDA is in a "holding pattern."

The CDA is the inter-governmental organization overseeing the development of the former Umatilla Chemical Depot near Hermiston. The CDA Board consists of one representative each from Morrow County, Umatilla County, the Port of Morrow, the Port of Umatilla and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR).

Umatilla County has filed a lawsuit against the CDA, alleging breach of contract over a March vote that turned over control of industrial property to the two ports.

"We're waiting to see how that all plays out," Doherty said.

Morrow County Commissioner Jeff Wenholz, the county's representative on the CDA, said an affirmation of the transfer passed 3-2 at the last CDA meeting, with Morrow County and the ports of Morrow and Umatilla for and Umatilla County and CTUIR against.

CTUIR presented a motion to enter into mediation and suspend everything for 45-60 days, but that motion failed along the same lines.

"I think the county's position on this is that what's in Morrow County, we ought to have say on, not the other people outside of the county having a say on what develops out there," he said, adding that the two ports were the money-makers with experience in development. "So we'll see where Umatilla County goes with their lawsuit."

Mittelsdorf added that, the way it stood, Morrow County could be outvoted by the other three parties regarding what happens inside the county.

"It's to the benefit of the citizens of Morrow County to have local control," she said.

## Heppner

Heppner City Manager John Doherty reported that the first meeting for Heppner's economic development committee took place in June. Three goals that came out of the meeting were increasing

housing, improving daycare services and attracting new businesses.

For housing, Doherty said a new subdivision will be going in east of the hospital and Rock St. The project will move forward after the city gets another well and reservoir located on that hill. The city has also been looking at smaller buildable parcels within town, including properties that are neglected or have absentee homeowners.

"We have a lot of that here, where kids live on the other side of the state or the other side of the country and a parent passes away and the property just gets neglected," Doherty said. "Trying to get some people to move forward with either rehabilitation and renting or selling."

He also mentioned that Heppner building space is limited by steep topography and flood plains.

For daycare services, Heppner Day Care is looking for property to buy so it can expand. Doherty said the state policies on daycare square footage are strict, and Heppner Day Care has reached its capacity.

"They've looked at a couple of properties and, for the size of property that they need to build their facility, that has been a challenge in Heppner," he said.

For attracting new businesses, Doherty said there are underused storefronts in the commercial district, and most of the industrial land is currently within the flood plain.

The city's water master plan is nearly complete, and the city is planning various water, wastewater and street projects. However, Doherty said that, realistically, it would probably be 2026 before any water projects are able to break ground.

The city is also updating several ordinances, specifically for mobile homes and short-term rentals. Doherty said the city is having issues with people putting in short-term rentals while there aren't enough long-term rentals and homes to support the Heppner workforce. It also poses difficulty collecting transient room taxes.

Keefer mentioned that he had attended a League of Oregon Cities meeting and heard that cities around the state are having the same issues, especially along the coast.

"Some of those tourist towns who really need that sales tax are losing it due to Airbnbs," said Keefer. "That's a serious problem that cities in the state of Oregon are dealing with."

John Doherty also reported that the building on Gale and Willow in Heppner is getting closer to completion. The building will contain some offices, such as the Heppner Chamber of Commerce, and will have a commercial kitchen.

That will add to the meeting space available in Heppner, in addition to the Gilliam Bisbee Building, which has gained in popularity in the last five years.

"That building gets quite a bit of use, and now we'll have another one," he said. "It'll be a neat addition to the city."

He said the new building should be fully operational by the first of September. The current chamber office space will be converted to a vendor mercantile.

## Boardman

Keefer reported that Boardman is reviewing and discussing its local charter. The last time it was discussed was 1985.

"We're looking at coming up to a better and improved charter," he said.

They have had several community outreach events, and the new charter will be on the November ballot.

The city is also working on several capital improvement projects and finishing up its General Obligation Bond water projects.

Boardman continues to try to address the shortage of middle income, or workforce, housing.

Keefer also said they were putting "significant effort" into updating the city's guidance and regulatory documents, including the transportation system plan, development code, municipal code and comprehensive plan.

## Ione

Patton, who is also an Ione City Council member, said the city got approval from the USDA to move forward with the new sewer system for Ione.

"We got the promise from Business Oregon that we're going to be fully funded and we got the promise from DEQ that we're going to get that loan," he said.

The city will be moving forward on the sewer system in about 30 days.

"I never, ever thought this was going to happen, but somehow we got it done," he said. "It's a good thing for Ione."

## Irrigon

Palmquist was optimistic about Irrigon's outlook. He said more than \$17 million has been brought into the city in the 11 years he has been city manager. Most recently, Oregon State

Parks awarded Irrigon a million dollars for a splash park.

"It's going to be totally different, not normal," he said.

Palmquist said Irrigon's Safe Route to School ODOT project took six years to accomplish but is finally done. ODOT is coming out to video it, and it will be on YouTube, Palmquist said.

The city also paved two city streets that had been gravel, which were 100 percent paid for through user fees. They are also beginning to meet concerning city infrastructure updates.

## Lexington

Lexington Town Recorder Autum Crumpton reported that the town just purchased the property for its new well site. Anderson Perry has finished the design, but the town is still looking for funding. They are hoping to begin construction by the end of 2025.

The well will be in addition to the town's current well. The town had a recent water shortage, which Crumpton said she thought was from firefighters pulling from the town's water source.

"It went right back up," she said.

Lexington Town Councilor Katie Imes has started a Lexington Community Development nonprofit.

The town has also received funding for the next May Day celebration and will be meeting soon to begin planning.

The next city-county-port quarterly meeting is planned for October 29.

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