



the HEPPNER
GAZETTE
TIMES

50¢



VOL. 144 NO. 38 10 Pages Wednesday, September 25, 2024 Morrow County, Heppner, Oregon

Commissioner’s decision to locate circuit court in Boardman sparks public outcry

By Annalynn Black

A public workshop meeting called by the Heppner City Council to discuss the relocation of the circuit court from Heppner to Boardman saw tensions rise as council members voiced their displeasure with Judge Hill’s involvement in the decision. The meeting included the Heppner City Council, Commissioner Sykes, County Administrator Matt Jensen and the public.

Mayor Sweeney opened the meeting, expressing the council’s frustrations with Judge Hill’s influence. “The way the council feels is that Judge Hill has interjected way too much in getting his way in getting that to the north end because it is Judge Hill that is the only one that we have heard advocate for it to be in Boardman. We have not heard from people in Boardman advocating for it to be there, yet it has been a lot of discussion and advocacy for it to stay here in Heppner,” Sweeney explained.

When asked by a councilmember to start the discussion with Judge Hill’s role in the decision-making process, Sykes replied, “I cannot control Judge Hill, I can’t speak for Judge Hill, I can’t speak for the other commissioners. I mean, I can tell you that I voted to have it in Heppner since the very beginning, and I have done everything, and I can tell you my life has been like the last year and a half if you wanna hear it. I just wanna say that I have done everything I can.”

Despite Sykes’ reassurances that all input was considered democratically, a councilwoman retorted that Judge Hill’s last-minute letter opposing the relocation to Heppner should have been scrutinized more closely. She expressed, “we realize you’ve done what you can Dave, but we’re just saying that we were caught blindsided by Judge Hill and that should have been, that should have carried some weight.”

County Administrator Matt Jensen took a minute to address the absence of other commissioners, explaining that Drago was on a planned vacation and Wenholz had prior commitments representing the County. Sykes further emphasized the council’s lack of control over the involvement of Judge Hill stating, “we didn’t ask for it, this was done by him - we didn’t ask him to get involved, nothing.”

Councilman Cody High questioned the sudden inclusion of additional sites in Boardman for consideration, highlighting a June 5th Board of Commissioners (BOC) meeting where only two Heppner sites, the mill site and the fairgrounds, were initially discussed. Jensen clarified that the shift occurred after they had informed Judge Hill about their preliminary decision not to proceed with the mill site, prompting him to send a letter. However, Jensen acknowledged that the Oregon Department of Justice (ODJ) does indeed have the authority to influence the courthouse loca-

tion, a point that was met with skepticism from the public, eliciting a simple “no” from an attendee.

High pressed on, seeking clarity on how the decision moved away from Heppner to which Sykes responded saying that there was a decision to be made between Heppner and Boardman, but when they received a letter from the Supreme Justices as well saying it can be outside of Heppner that when things changes, “that’s when it broke loose from Heppner. Then the other sites in Boardman were considered,” Sykes explained.

Councilman Dale Bates asked the question that was on everyone’s mind regarding the commitment of commissioners who, during this election year, claimed they supported keeping the project in Heppner. Bates inquired, “This has been an election year, and we’ve had several commissioners up for election and they are all saying they’re wanting to keep it here, what happened with that?”

Sykes defended his position explaining the limitations of his authority to speak on behalf of other commissioners or judiciary members. “You need to talk to the other commissioners, on the phone, you’re asking me to speak for another commissioner, would you speak for that council member? Would you speak for the mayor?”

Sykes emphasized his commitment to transparency and willingness to discuss his role in detail, “I’m not gonna speak for

another commissioner and certainly not gonna speak for a Circuit Court Judge, or Supreme Court Justice. -I came and I’m happy to address this with you, I can tell you the whole scenario of what my role in this thing all from the get-go.”

Commissioner Sykes admitted the process “hasn’t been pretty at times” but assured attendees of his dedication to serving the community’s best interests.

City Attorney Bill Kuhn expressed his concerns about the absence of two other commissioners, stating, “The two other commissioners are not here, in spite of what Matt says, speaks words. But it appears you took Judge Hill at face value with the things he said, which I think was a mistake.” Sykes clarified that they were referring to the Supreme Court Justices of Oregon, but Kuhn retorted, explaining a misunderstanding of a letter from the Chief Justice, saying, “Yeah, we can put a courthouse somewhere else but we will bow to the will of the county commissioners—that’s how I read that letter.”

Kuhn also raised questions about Judge Hill’s statements regarding where court could be held, particularly in Milton-Freewater. According to the minutes, Judge Hill stated there was no case load to hold court in Milton-Freewater, which raised concerns for Kuhn about accessibility for residents, stating, “Does that mean he doesn’t think anybody in the Milton-Freewa-

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School shooting threat in Irrigon suspect arrested

A 14-year-old male student from Irrigon has been arrested in connection with a school shooting threat made on social media. The suspect is currently lodged at the NORCOR Juvenile Facility. The arrest followed an investigation by the Morrow County Sheriff’s Office in collaboration with the FBI, the Morrow County Juvenile Department, and the Morrow County School District. The investigation is ongoing.

The threat was reported to authorities late Sunday night, prompting swift action. Sheriff Bowles emphasized that there are no current safety concerns for the school, though an increased law enforcement presence will be maintained at Irrigon Junior-Senior High School as a precautionary measure.

Sheriff’s Statement
In a statement released

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Cougar spotted in Heppner



Not a picture of the actual cougar. - Contributed image

Cougar spotted on camera on Elder street 9/22/24 between the park and the elementary school. While they are normally nocturnal, you never know.

Please be extra careful with children and pets. More info will be provided as it becomes available. ODFW has been advised.

Smith loses pay raise, faces salary repayment amid controversy

Greg Smith, the longest-serving member of the Oregon House and an employee of the Columbia Development Authority (CDA), has had his significant pay raise revoked by the CDA board following allegations of misconduct. In a special meeting, the board voted to rescind pay increases for both Smith and his assistant, Debbie Pedro, which had been retroactively applied since April. It was alleged by two board members that Smith had misled the board in

securing the raises.

As a result of the board’s decision, Smith’s salary will be reduced from \$195,000 to \$129,000 annually. Additionally, he may be required to repay an estimated \$33,000. Pedro, whose salary had increased by \$55,000, may need to repay \$23,500.

The Columbia Development Authority, established in 2014, manages federal funds and oversees the former Umatilla Chemical Depot lands, which

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Seniors Matter exercise program a huge hit with local seniors

By Chris Sykes

The South Morrow County Seniors Matter initiative, supported by grants from the Roundhouse Foundation and the Oregon Community Foundation, continues to grow as a community favorite. With a dedicated team of three part-time employees and numerous volunteers, the program offers a range of activities designed to improve the health and well-being of local seniors.

One of the most popular activities is the “YOLO Activities” exercise class, where participants engage in chair exercises to upbeat music. During a recent session, led by Deb Green, seniors moved to Tina Turner’s hit “Proud Mary,” creating a lively and energetic atmosphere. Participants spoke highly of the program, sharing how it has positively impacted them physically, mentally, and spiritually. Barb Orwick, a regular attendee, said, “It’s like a community here. I love coming to exercise!”

The dining area of the senior center, now unofficially dubbed the “YOLO Center” (short for “You Only Live Once”), regu-



Chris Sykes attending the SMCSM exercise program. -Photo by Jerry Conklin.

larly hosts around 20 to 30 participants for the exercise sessions every Tuesday and Thursday at 8:30 a.m. and every Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. In addition to these exercises, yoga classes are offered on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays at 4 p.m.

Upcoming Expansion and Award Recognition

Seniors Matter is not only thriving but also expanding. New programs are set to launch in January, providing even more opportunities for local seniors to stay active and engaged. These additions aim to meet the growing demand for social, physical, and educational activities.

Next week, Seniors

Matter will also be honored with an award for outstanding service in Bend, recognizing the organization’s contributions to the senior community.

Upcoming Events

In addition to the exercise programs, Seniors Matter continues to offer a variety of educational seminars and activities:

October 10: “Mastery of Aging Well – Memory Difficulties: Should I Be Worried?” at 11 a.m.

October 24: “Getting to Know Dementia” seminar at 11 a.m.

For October, the program schedule includes:

Every Tuesday: Chair exercise at 8:30 a.m., senior meals at 11:30 a.m., and

yoga at 4 p.m.

Every Wednesday evening: Chair exercise and yoga at 6:30 p.m.
Every Thursday morning: Chair exercise at 8:30 a.m., social time at 9 a.m., and yoga at 4 p.m. (Note: No activities on Halloween).

Movie Night: October 17 at 6 p.m.

With continued support from the community and ongoing program expansions, Seniors Matter is making a meaningful difference in the lives of local seniors, fostering physical health, social connection, and personal well-being.

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