



# the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

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## Citizens voice concerns to MCHD board

By Andrea Di Salvo

Morrow County Health District has come under fire recently regarding some of its practices over the past few years.

A group of concerned citizens had previously sent an open letter to the MCHD board, citing concerns regarding employee turnover, cost of temporary employees, current doctor workload and lack of patient care, among others.

Many of those citizens showed up at the health district board meeting Monday night in Heppner, ready to voice their concerns to the board in person. The meeting room at Pioneer Memorial Clinic was packed, with more than 25 members of the public present and standing room only. About 13 participants were also present via Zoom.

Prior to the meeting, MCHD had provided responses to the questions voiced in the open letter and had published them on its website for the public to review. Community members like Karen Thompson, however, said some of the answers still left a lot of questions.

“The whole point is, we need a doctor, we need nurses, and we don’t have

them,” she told the board.

Shanny Miller said she had heard many times that the health district can’t find a physician who wants to live in the Heppner area. With frustration in her voice, she listed several physicians, physician’s assistants and nurses who live in Heppner and travel elsewhere to work—many of whom, she said, had previously worked for MCHD.

“I am sure until this administration is replaced, you can say goodbye to your clinic, your hospital,” said Miller.

Brian Thompson echoed her sentiment, saying he counted about 10 doctors who worked in Heppner during most of his lifetime, while the district has gone through nine in the last few years, he said.

“I’m not pointing fingers, but it’s broken,” said Thompson.

Two previous health district employees, Susie Thompson and Patti Allstott, grew emotional when they spoke of their reasons for leaving the health district. Allstott said she had worked for MCHD 19 years, 18 in human resources, while Thompson pointed to a 35-year history as a nurse with the district.

Thompson said the health district “decided to not use my employment,” saying her nursing experience was not put to use as she was only offered about an hour a week, answering phones during lunch.

“They just kept saying they didn’t need me,” she said.

She also had harsh words for the board, saying the environment at the health district had become “toxic,” and she questioned the motives behind her eventual removal.

“I believe it is punishment by retaliation,” said Thompson.

Allstott said she appreciated the staff still at the clinic and hospital, but was concerned that those left, such as Amanda Roy, would burn out and leave.

“I’m very concerned about how long the health district can remain viable,” she said. “I believe we’ve got to have a big value placed on people.”

Amy Kollman also said MCHD’s response to the questions left something to be desired. She asked about how the employee turnover rate is calculated, how it compares to other area hospitals, and what exactly was involved in

the district’s attempts at employee engagement.

“Our closest competitors are fully staffed with family physicians,” Kollman said, adding, “Where are the rates of absenteeism coming from?”

Kim Cutsforth said she appreciated having the clinic and hospital in Heppner, but believed the quality has suffered in the past year or so.

“The experience has greatly disintegrated,” she said.

Molly Rill also said the experience is not what it used to be, citing a disappointing visit to the emergency room a year ago.

“We’ve got to make this work,” she said. “Let’s get it done and stop messing around.”

Until that happens, she added, she will find someone to drive her to Pendleton the next time she has an emergency.

While most of the voices at the meeting were critical, there were some who spoke up in defense of the health district and board.

Molly Rhea said she has been a registered nurse since 1979 and has been with Morrow County Health District for all but

## Cougar in Heppner no longer a threat



Not a picture of the actual cougar. - Contributed image

The Morrow County Sheriff’s Office has been working with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to locate the Cougar that was seen on Elder Street in Heppner near the Elementary School. As of

Thursday September 26th, the Cougar has been located and is no longer a threat or a safety concern. The cougar was a young cougar about 38 lbs and was probably separated from its mother.

## Heppner Volleyball Seniors



Hallee Hisler. -Photo by Susie Hisler



Ava Gerry. -Photo by Susie Hisler

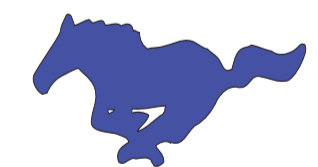


Katie Spivey. -Photo by Susie Hisler



Keeley Nairns. -Photo by Susie Hisler

The girls volleyball team will be having their Senior night this week, the seniors honored will be; Katie Spivey #20, Keeley Nairns #24, Ava Gerry #10, and Hallee Hisler #11.



## Heppner welcomes the Paytons as the new mortuary owners

By Annalynn Black

Joshua Payton, a native of Adel, Iowa, has navigated a life marked by personal loss and professional transformation. In his latest professional endeavor, Josh successfully transitioned into the role of the new Heppner funeral director, taking over a well-established funeral business previously owned by the Sweeney family.

The Sweeneys, who have been a staple in the community, handed over their business to Peyton, ensuring a smooth transition. “I don’t know if it’s because the universe had a plan for this to work out, but they’ve just been super great to work with,” Josh said, adding that the Sweeneys have become like pseudo grandparents to his children. “This may be a business transaction, but it doesn’t feel like it,” he added, acknowledging the mutual respect and concern both families hold for one another.

Josh’s journey to becoming a funeral director was an unexpected career path. He initially aspired to be a social worker/grief counselor. However, while studying at Oregon State University, Josh took a class on the Sociology of Death and Dying that piqued his interest in how different cultures address mortality. This curiosity led him to interview a local funeral director, an encounter that not only extended for hours but also led to a job shadowing opportunity.

He found his calling in the funeral business, where he helps families navi-



The Paytons (L-R) Joshua, Lucas, Becca, and Rachel in front of their new home. -Photo by Annalynn Black

gate their most challenging times. “If I can take the hardest thing they’ll ever have to do and make it a little easier, that’s what I’m here for,” he often tells the families he serves.

“I was delivering pizzas and helping kids in traumatic situations at the time, and I thought, ‘yeah let’s try something else,’” Josh recalled. Since 2010, he has immersed himself in the world of funeral directing and embalming, finding a deep passion for the profession. “I just loved everything about it,” he remarked.

Starting his new career at AAsum-Dufour Funeral Home in Albany, Oregon in 2010, Josh honed his skills and served the community until 2020. Despite the challenging nature of his work, Josh confessed that the most rewarding part of his job was helping bereaved families during their difficult times. Josh reflect-

ed on the emotional aspects of his work. Saying there has to be a switch, where you can compartmentalize and focus on the bigger picture—helping families.

The turning point in his professional and personal life came when his mother succumbed to a 20-year battle with cancer. Devastated, Josh decided to step away from his long-term position at AAsum-Dufour Funeral Home in March 2020. “I needed to take a break to deal with my grief,” John reveals, acknowledging that processing the loss while anticipating the birth of his child and the onset of the global pandemic mandated time for family and introspection. This hiatus marked the first time Josh had not worked since he was 15, a testament to his robust work ethic.

During this period, several job opportunities came knocking, but Josh stayed firm in his decision

to pause, saying he knew he could re-enter the workforce when it felt right to him. The hiatus lasted until August of the same year. His resilience caught the eye of De Moss-Durdan Funeral Home in Corvallis. Despite initially rejecting their offer, their persistence won him over and in 2021, he joined them as a manager. Yet, Josh soon realized managerial duties did not satiate his aspirations. “I often felt like the epitome of a middle manager, disconnected from the real impacts of the job,” he explained.

In his quest for a more fulfilling role, Josh ventured toward ownership, initially setting his sights on purchasing Aasum-Dufour. In 2023, he reached out, but was informed the potential transaction wouldn’t be considered until 2025. Unfortunately, the landscape had shifted, and the funeral home was sold to a corporation, a turn of events that closed that chapter for Josh.

## Ione & Arlington Middle School Volleyball

Oct 7<sup>th</sup> v. Dufur in Dufur, A) 4pm B) 5pm C) 6pm. Ione departs at 1:30pm, Arlington departs at 2:15pm.  
Oct 9<sup>th</sup> v. Sherman County on Arlington A) 4pm B) 5pm C)

6pm, Ione departs at 2:30pm.  
Oct 14<sup>th</sup> v. Horizon Christian in Hood River, A) 4pm B) 5pm C) 6pm. Ione departs at 1:15, Arlington departs at 2pm.



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