

# Heppner's Parade of Lights continued from page one



# AWANA takes winter break



Junior AWANA leader Zethan Humphreys displays the craft project the Spark club members completed over a series of weeks. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo



Older club members listen to leader Dick Temple during large group time Dec. 17. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo



AWANA Sparks create a craft with their leaders last week. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

# Commissioners give green light to \$35 million circuit court budget plan

-Continued from PAGE ONE roughly 21,000 gross square feet. The team had already been working in that direction, but Stewart added the caveat that the reduced price would also mean moving quickly. Further delays could add in more escalation costs.

Jensen noted that the \$35 million figure did include funds already spent as well as those it will take to complete the project.

When it comes to the state's share of the cost, DLR Group principal Lori Coppenrath said that, once they figure out what portion of the building will belong to the circuit court, the state will pay 50 percent of that. Right now, she said, that looks like around 38 percent of the total project cost.

"That number will change as the square footage is refined," she added.

Jensen said removing the justice court from the building would likely save another three to five million dollars.

While the numbers were an improvement, Sykes said he was still concerned about how the county got to this point.

"I'm not arguing on the substance of circuit court or soft costs or anything like that," Sykes said.

He then began to read a proposal in which he asked the other commissioners to proceed with only the basic courthouse facility and to create a structure of long-term capital improvement planning in the county.

"A capital improvement plan has previously been discussed by the BOC administration and staff. However, it has never been initiated," Sykes said. "We are currently considering major facility expenditures."

That was where Sykes's interaction at the meeting ended. Sykes experienced a medical incident and was transported by ambulance to Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston. He apparently experienced an

abnormal heart rhythm for which he already had surgery scheduled at Kadlec Medical Center.

The minimal-invasive procedure was completed Dec. 19. In a letter of thanks to the community, Sykes said it went well, and he is feeling fine, but he will be taking some time off until after the holidays.

After a short break, the BOC meeting resumed with BOC Vice Chair Jeff Wenholtz taking the helm as acting chair. Wenholtz continued by reading the remainder of Sykes's statement.

"We're currently considering major facility expenditures in an ad hoc and at times seemingly spontaneous manner bereft of any needs or fiscal planning," Sykes's statement said.

Sykes also wrote that the county currently has 11 committees advising commissioners and staff in almost every aspect of county operations and expenditures.

"Yet we have no advisory committee or planning process in place to map out our future capital improvements and infrastructure needs and expenditures," Sykes wrote. "Whether through an advisory committee and public input or other means, I feel we need to think through our future needs and demands, know our estimated future revenues and apply those revenues accordingly in a planned and orderly manner."

"We all know the infrastructure and facility projects are needed moving into the future, including the current request to remove the Justice Court," the statement finished. "How will we in future BOCs make these capital allocation decisions? I would hope through planned and orderly methods."

Both Drago and Wenholtz said they agreed with Sykes's point about the capital planning.

"I don't disagree with the major premise of his

letter that we need to have capital infrastructure planning process and figure out how we're going to be paying for these," said Wenholtz. "On the other hand, personally, I would like to see the justice court be moved with (the circuit court)."

"Don't get me wrong; \$35 million is a lot of money for us," he added. "But in the scheme of the project, it's really a small percentage."

"And then, it's going to be cheaper to do that today in the process than in the future with an addition," added Drago.

Wenholtz said it made sense to him to have both the circuit court and justice court in one facility. He said he thought it would make it easier for citizens who had to attend either court to have both under one roof.

"I would appreciate that we move forward with the idea of \$35 million, including the justice court, because as the point you made, it's never going to be cheaper to do it," he told Drago.

"I believe that we should be keeping both courts in the same building. That's been my thought all along," replied Drago. "I was one that brought that forward. I still stand on that."

The two commissioners voted to authorize the county staff and design team to proceed with the

revised schematic space design, including the justice court, with a targeted total project cost of \$35 million.

Of that, the county's current estimated cost would be around \$21.5 million, with the state chipping in \$13.5 million.

Coppenrath added some perspective to the process by pointing out that DLR Group was first hired to look at the existing courthouse and how that might be expanded. Since then, through changes in county leadership and new DOJ requirements, the project had morphed significantly.

The original thought of \$800 per square foot had also gone by the wayside.

"But the construction costs just continue to go up," Coppenrath said. "This is aligned with other projects we're working on in the state."

"We're at the \$1,200 to \$1,300 square foot for construction cost number, which is a lot," she added. "And that's how we got to where we are right now."

"I think that this has kind of been a learning process for all of us," said Wenholtz. "We had the \$25 million out there, and none of us maybe knew or understood or made it clear that this was really just a really big ballpark idea."

"From our standpoint, the messaging to the community could have been better," he added.

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The Heppner AWANA program is the combined effort of local churches to teach children what the Bible is all about. AWANA stands for "Approved Workers Are Not Ashamed," based on II Timothy 2:15.

New members are always welcome. For more information on the Heppner AWANA Club, contact AWANA Heppner secretary Andrea Di Salvo at awana.heppner@gmail.com, 757-285-5792, or via Facebook Messenger.

Heppner AWANA Club held its last meeting of 2024 on Dec. 17 with "Birthday Candle Night" to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The local club will resume Jan. 7 with "Snowflake Night."

The mood was festive last week as the club members played games, sang songs and participated in Bible lessons and memorization. The Sparks—ages kindergarten to third grade—also completed a craft project for Christmas.

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