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BOC votes 2-1 to move circuit court building back to Heppner



Clockwise from top left: County Commissioner Gus Peterson, County Commissioner Jeff Wenholz, County Administrator, Matt Jensen and County Commissioner David Sykes. — Contributed Photo

By Andrea Di Salvo

In a split vote last week, the Morrow County Board of Commissioners voted to repeal the decision to place the county's new circuit court annex in Boardman. The planned courthouse will again be sited at the original Heppner site near the county fairgrounds.

After more than a year of time, money and contention about building sites in the south end of the county, the BOC voted in November to site the county's new circuit court building—which the county then referred to as a circuit court "annex"—in Boardman. That decision was made in a 2-1 vote, with BOC Chair David Sykes dissenting.

That all changed Jan. 8. New commissioner Gus Peterson of Ione fueled the reversal by requesting that the circuit court's location be put on the agenda for his first meeting as a Morrow County Commissioner.

Peterson said he appreciated all the public comment and those who had reached out to him on the topic already.

"Since the announcement of an additional courthouse space, this project has been plagued with

twists and turns and we have arrived at a juncture where I am afraid there is no decision that we can make that will not result in unhappiness from some folks," said Peterson.

While the move back to Heppner was met with opposition, Peterson seemed prepared to take the heat for his actions. He said that he would not blame anyone who was upset with decisions he made as a commissioner and that he believed a reasonable case could be made for either location.

"That said, Heppner is the county seat," Peterson said. "The impact will be greater for the City of Heppner than it would be for anywhere else."

He said the City of Heppner had made it clear how much the project meant to the community.

Despite vocal opposition from some quarters, the Heppner City Council stated from the beginning that it supported locating the new circuit court building in the city.

Many citizens who spoke against the fairgrounds site apparently changed their minds when Boardman was selected, going so far as to circulate

a petition asking the BOC to reverse the decision to site the building in Boardman.

"If we are going to be good partners with all of our communities, then that is something that I think that we really need to value," said Peterson.

He also said that, while he saw that the law could be interpreted differently, he thought it clearly indicated that the court should remain in Heppner.

The sixth judicial district includes Morrow and Umatilla counties. The statute in question states that "the judges of the district shall hold court in Pendleton, Hermiston, Milton-Freewater and Heppner as required by caseload."

"I'm not willing to gamble a 30 million-plus project on that understanding being wrong or subject to interpretation that may change at a future point in time," he said.

He was backed by BOC Chair David Sykes. Part of Sykes's platform in his own run for commissioner had been to make sure Heppner retains an active circuit court.

"I've been consistent on this from the beginning when I took office, prior to

when I took office," said Sykes. "I promised everything I could do. My feeling hasn't changed."

Judge Daniel Hill, presiding judge for the sixth judicial district, was clearly unhappy with the move.

He began by saying that the statute Peterson cited was an "anomaly" created to establish a Milton-Freewater location, but that the principal statute gave the chief justice the power to designate the courthouse's location.

"The chief justice is the head of the judicial branch and pretty much what she says goes," said Hill, adding that moving the courthouse from Heppner posed, "Zero risk. One hundred percent zero risk. A thousand percent zero risk."

He also pointed to opposition against the fairgrounds site, saying not one supporter came forward until after it was determined the Kinzua Mill site was unsuitable.

He said moving the courthouse to Boardman was a compromise that gave better court access to both ends of the county, especially since more than

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Heppner answers call for California fires



A tactical tender pulls away from the Heppner Fire Department last week. Heppner Fire received a call for the tender to go down to California and help with the fires raging in the south. HFD Lt. Stacy Lauritsen and Lt. Katilyn Zinter were headed to Boardman to meet up with another truck before heading to California together. —Contributed photo

Good Shepherd's first baby of the new year born to Ione family



Good Shepherd's first baby of 2025 was born to Jalene Clabaugh and Dakota Warren of Ione on Jan. 1. —Contributed photo

HERMISTON, OR—Good Shepherd Health Care System (GSHCS) announced it welcomed the area's first baby of the new year, born to parents Jalene Clabaugh and Dakota Warren of Ione.

Waylon Warren was born on Jan. 1, 2025, at 8:15 p.m., weighing 6 pounds and 10.8 ounces. He was 19.5 inches long.

Waylon was born in the care of OB/GYN Gary Trupp, MD, and the nursing team at Good Shepherd's Family Birth Center (FBC).

When asked what's most exciting about having the first baby of 2025 born at GSHCS, Clabaugh shared, "It's crazy. It sets forth a good year—new year, new baby!"

Clabaugh added that she is part of a group of three friends that are all expecting babies around the same time.

The couple said that baby Waylon's first day was very calm while he seemed to be taking everything in.

"One of our favorite moments so far was when

Waylon sneezed for the first time; it was really cute!" said Clabaugh.

With the new year came many good wishes shared with the couple.

"This is our first baby and the first grandbaby in our family. We are all very excited! Our New Year's wish for Waylon is good health," said Clabaugh.

Each year this special New Year's baby is welcomed with much anticipation, admits FBC Interim Nurse Manager Cherie Wilson, RNC.

"It is truly a special occasion for our physicians and staff each year," said Wilson.

She said the family received a special gift from FBC, a wagon full of diapers, wipes, books, clothes, swaddle blankets, soap, lotion, a robe and Nivea skin care set for Mother, a safety kit, a 'Baby's First Yearbook,' and a blanket handmade and gifted by the Coffee Creek Women's Correction Facility.

"I sincerely hope that

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Kotek declares state of emergency in Morrow and Umatilla counties

Emergency order allows for limited wastewater application in LUBGWMA



Oregon Governor Tina Kotek — Contributed Photo

Salem, OR—Monday, Oregon Governor Tina Kotek declared a state of emergency due to the risk of economic shutdown impacting Morrow and Umatilla counties.

The emergency declaration makes an exception to the Port of Morrow's current wastewater per-

mit with the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), authorizing the Port to apply wastewater if necessary to fields within the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area (LUBGWMA) that are either down gradient from any domestic wells or designated as "low-risk."

The declaration only allows this from Jan. 15 through Feb. 28, which marks the end of the agricultural winter "non-growing season" when irrigation is not undertaken to grow agricultural crops.

"Morrow and Umatilla counties are key to our state's agricultural production—directly and indirectly employing thousands of Oregonians, and feeding not just Oregonians, but families across the globe," Governor Kotek stated in a press release.

Kotek said her office has heard from producers and farmers in the LUBGWMA who have said that pausing operations even for a short time would be "devastating" to the local economy. Many fear it could

shut down some operations permanently.

"This would result in lost jobs for community members across the region.

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