

# Heppner Chamber of Commerce annual luncheon

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Nicole Mahoney speaks at the Heppner Chamber Annual Luncheon. - Photo by The Heppner Chamber of Commerce.



Jerry Conklin - Photo by The Heppner Chamber of Commerce.



Ann Murray - Photo by The Heppner Chamber of Commerce.



Kim Coil speaking at the Heppner Chamber Annual Luncheon. - Photo by The Heppner Chamber of Commerce.

and the St. Patrick's Celebration March 13-16.

During the luncheon, the Heppner Chamber Volunteer of the Year Award was presented to Alita Nelson in recognition of her dedicated service as the St. Patrick's and Morrow County Fair & Rodeo parade coordinator and as chairperson for the St. Patrick's bed race.

The chamber also held

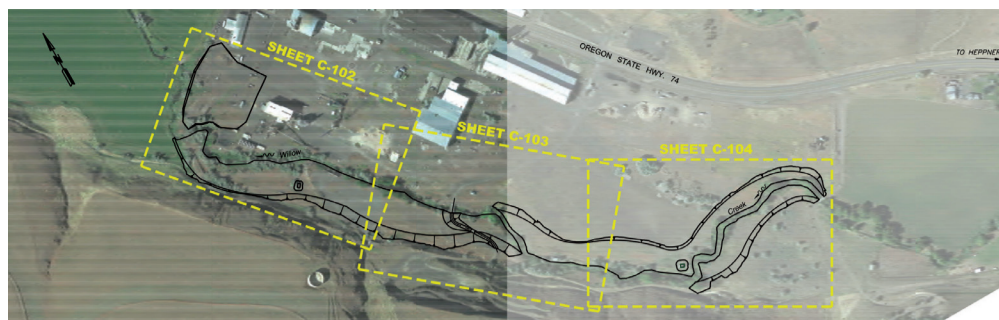
its annual board installation: President, Brandi Sweeney; First Vice President, Kim Coil; Treasurer, Natalie Robinson; board members Amy Wolters, Alicia Doherty, Jerry Conklin, Ann Murray and Amber Schlaich; and new board member John Doherty.

The event concluded with a lunch catered by Tacos Hometown.

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# Flood mitigation is a step in the right direction, but hurdles still remain at the old mill site



Engineer's rendering of the flood mitigation along Willow Creek. - Contributed Image

By Andrea Di Salvo

The Port of Morrow has been given the go-ahead to begin flood mitigation in the South Morrow Industrial Park along Willow Creek, but what does that mean for Heppner?

According to Mark Patton, POM Chief Operating Officer, work on the flood plain is the next step in what he hopes will be a short journey toward making the former Kinzua Mill site completely buildable.

"That's the first step that needs to be complete," he says.

That first step had been a long time coming.

Patton says the old mill site first went through a review with the Dept. of Environmental Quality in the early 2000s. The appropriate paperwork was apparently filed with the DEQ at that time but "disappeared," Patton says.

It wasn't until they put the flood mitigation work out for bid and applied for DEQ permits to do the work that they realized the process had never been completed.

"So we had to back it up," he says. "We basically had to pick up the ball again."

The Port began going through the process of conducting more tests to satisfy the DEQ. Port staff also went through their archives and dug up previous records, which they handed over to the Port's engineering firms.

Testing done at the site so far has not found anything negative in the site's soil; Patton says the DEQ has given the mill site "a clean bill of health."

The POM started the process in 2021 and was awarded a state grant in 2023. It was only recently, though, that the Port received DEQ's clearance to begin work.

With the DEQ's approval coming through, Patton is hopeful that the project will be sent out for

bid in the next couple of weeks.

Meanwhile, engineering firm Anderson Perry and GSI Water Solutions are working on a contamination management plan, which will guide the contractor doing the work. For instance, if they find any soil that doesn't look consistent with the soil around it, it will need to be tested.

The steps are necessary, but the extra time and effort have driven the cost far above what was expected. POM originally agreed to chip in \$86,000 but has already spent more than \$250,000 on engineering and site environmental review, Patton said.

The Port isn't the only one with money on the line. Willow Creek Economic Development Group (WC-VEDG) fronted \$350,000, while Morrow County had promised another \$100,000. The Port also received an Oregon State Special Public Works grant to help with the funding and has budgeted up to \$80,000 more of its own money to finish the process.

As far as the flood mitigation process is concerned, the contractor will not be working in Willow Creek itself. Rather, they will excavate along each side of the creek to expand the width so water can flow freely.

"So it's just basically making a wider channel," Patton says. "We're just moving dirt."

Some of that dirt will be moved off-site. Some of it will be used to build up the lower elevation ground near Blue Mountain Manufacturing.

Patton is optimistic that the process will be quick but says it will be a summer project.

"We won't even start this till all the high water comes down Willow Creek," he says.

Once the work starts, hopefully around May of

this year, it should take five to six months to complete the flood mitigation project. Patton says he hopes to see it completed by October.

Meanwhile, Patton says there is still a complete study that needs to be done to satisfy DEQ. That should take six months to a year to complete.

"A lot of the stuff has been done," he said. "We only need to do more tests."

However, the flood mitigation removes a huge hurdle to siting any projects on the old mill site. While there is concrete that needs to be demolished before anyone can build in that area, Patton says there wasn't much point until they dealt with the flood plain.

"This does open up some opportunities for anyone who wants to go there," he said.

The 130-acre property does have some existing business on site, as well as the Morrow County Oregon State University Extension Office, the local DMV office and the Oregon Dept of Fish and Wildlife.

At the same time, Patton says, getting people interested in building at the mill site is a hurdle in itself. Attempts to attract businesses, both regional and out of state, have been disappointing.

"We always try to bring the site up, especially with someone local, but it's difficult," Patton said.

The rural location and lack of major transportation infrastructure makes the site less than appealing for many. The mill isn't coming back, Patton says, and neither is any other large business—not without rail or barge to transport goods.

So, the Port's efforts have been toward attracting small to medium regional companies.

"Home grown people are better," he says, saying local people are better able to handle the rural location.

"But it's also got to pencil," he adds, saying a lot of small businesses can't justify the cost of building at the site. "We're always hopeful to get someone up there."

He did say the Port had been approached by a cryptocurrency company, but had turned them away because it would have provided no jobs and would have been a huge drain on the power grid, using 10 megawatts of power.

For now, with flood mitigation underway, the Port will continue to work on the rest of the DEQ's requirements simultaneously. Patton said he hopes to have the land completely buildable in a year.

After that, the property's future is less certain.

"I don't know what the city wants to do with the property," he says, adding that the Port is open to any ideas. "We don't want to shove something down Heppner's throat that they don't want."

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