



# the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

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## Community meeting highlights concerns over hospital and MCHD gives response



(R) Patti Alstot addresses community members at The Hub in Heppner regarding concerns about the Morrow County Health District and Pioneer Memorial Hospital. - Contributed Photo

By Chris Sykes

On March 11, 2025, a community meeting regarding the Morrow County Health District (MCHD) and Pioneer Memorial Hospital drew over 50 people in person and nearly as many on Zoom.

The discussion, moderated by Janet Greenup, focused on claims of administrative failures, staffing shortages, and the hospital's shift to contract workers over local hires, with additional concerns raised about high turnover of nurses, physicians and employees in the last couple of years.

While some hospital employees attended, many did not speak during the meeting.

Greenup opened the session by outlining the comment structure: physicians in the room would speak first, followed by Zoom participants, then other medical profession-

als, and finally the public. She emphasized the need for factual statements over emotional ones, banned personal attacks, and encouraged brevity. Speakers were asked to raise their hands and use microphones.

Dr. Russ Nichols, a physician with a long history at the hospital, took the floor. Nichols, who began working at Pioneer Memorial in November 1999 and continued with breaks until around 2021, now practices at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton. He reminisced about a time when the health district employed multiple "hometown workers"—providers, lab technicians, nurses, and maintenance staff—and expressed his desire to restore that model.

"I like having my patients see me in Pendleton, but I wish they didn't have to drive there for care," Nichols said, noting he sees

patients from Lexington, Hardman, Ione, Heppner and surrounding areas. He argued the facility could handle this demand with proper staffing.

Sheridan Tarnasky, a longtime Heppner resident and former medical provider at the clinic and hospital, voiced frustration over the uncertainty surrounding the hospital.

"We have to figure out something to do, because probably a lot of what I hear is rumor, but I'm sure there's some factual information in there too," she said.

When she asked how many attendees sought medical care out of town, over half the room raised their hands.

Tarnasky pointed to administration as the root issue. She cited Facebook posts about staff being fired or placed on administrative leave, noting many in the

room were former hospital employees who "didn't leave because they wanted to."

She claimed, "They don't have a good administrative team that is there for their staff or the community."

Estes asked why the board opted for contract workers over local hires.

Tarnasky responded, claiming the last physicians left due to lack of administrative support, adding, "The word has gotten around, and people don't want to come here. That's the only thing they can do—contract."

Another community member supported this, insisting it wasn't a financial decision.

Janet Greenup clarified, "It's not specifically the administrative team, but the board that doesn't support

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## Wilson selected as Heppner's new football coach

Heppner High School has announced the appointment of Rob Wilson as the new Head Football Coach. Wilson has been a vital part of the Mustang football program for the past 10 years and steps into this role following the retirement of longtime coach Greg Grant.

Wilson states, "I'm excited to continue the strong traditions of Mustang Football."



Rob Wilson

## Wee Bit O' Ireland pictures page 7



## Heppner council revisits library citing

City moves forward with water master plan



City attorney and OTLD board member Bill Kuhn (left) and city manager John Doherty. -Contributed

By Andrea Di Salvo

The Heppner City Council again discussed possible future locations for a new Heppner library at its March 10 meeting in Heppner. Oregon Trail Library District Director Kathy Street and OTLD board member Bill Kuhn attended the meeting as a follow-up to the OTLD's previous request regarding a future new library building at Heppner City Park.

The library district had earlier approached the city about the possibility of building a new 5,000-square-foot library on part of the Heppner City Park property, but the city had concerns about loss of park space and trees, building size and parking requirements.

Kuhn said the OTLD wants to build a space that enhances the city, and he

still thought that could be accomplished at the city park.

"I think the city's done an amazing job increasing park size and enhancing park facilities throughout Heppner," he said. "The idea here with the library is, can we enhance and complement the park area?"

The zoning for a new building of that size would require about four new spaces of off-street parking. Kuhn stressed that the library has already been in that location a long time, and the city has worked with other old buildings like the Gilliam Bisbee building without requiring additional parking. He also thought the building could be placed without sacrificing too many trees.

"This all works, but there are things to think

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## Greater Idaho bills wait for hearing in Oregon Legislature

By Andrea Di Salvo

Despite setbacks, the Greater Idaho movement seems to be gaining ground in both Eastern Oregon and Idaho, the Morrow County Board of Commissioners learned at its last regular meeting March 5 in Heppner.

However, further momentum also means gaining ground in the Oregon Legislature, where two bills are currently sitting in committee, waiting for action.

Matt McCaw, Executive Director for the Greater Idaho Movement, told the commissioners that "the people have spoken."

"They want to have this conversation. They want their elected leaders to have this conversation," said McCaw. "The State of Idaho is a willing partner. The State of Oregon has currently not acted, though our representatives in Eastern Oregon have introduced bills."

Thirteen counties in Eastern Oregon have passed "pretty radical" measures supporting the idea of moving the border, he said.

Ten of those, including Morrow County, passed measures requiring ongoing discussions by county leadership. Another three, McCaw said, were straight-up advisory questions asking citizens if they wanted to join Idaho.

In Morrow County, voters approved by a large margin a bill requiring the board of commissioners to meet three times a year to discuss how to promote the county's interests in such a border change. March 5 was

the first of those meetings for 2025.

By law, any two bordering states may move their state border if both state legislatures agree to it. To that end, McCaw said, the State of Idaho passed a house measure in 2023 inviting the Oregon Legislature to begin border talks.

"So the state of Idaho has seen what adding Eastern Oregon counties would mean for Idaho," said McCaw. "They are open to the idea. They're ready to have this discussion."

Idaho Governor Brad Little has publicly supported border talks, and polling in Idaho shows strong support for the idea, McCaw said.

On the Oregon side, McCaw said the movement currently has two bills in the Oregon Legislature.

The first is a memorial bill similar to a bill put forward in 2023, which would invite Idaho to begin border talks. The 2023 bill was never given a hearing or moved into committee, but the group hopes for a better outcome with the 2025 bill.

The second bill, House Bill 3488, would create a task force to study "all things" about moving the border, McCaw said. The bill was sponsored by state representatives Mark Owens, Bobby Levy and Vikki Breese Iverson. Representatives Emily McIntire and Court Boice also support the bill. Rep. Greg Smith has not so-sponsored the bill.

McCaw said both bills are in the respective rules

committees for their chambers but have not been given hearings or work sessions yet.

"That's where we're pushing, is to get these bills a hearing, get them into a work session so that people can be heard and we can help advocate for what the people out here are asking for," said McCaw.

Morrow County Commissioner Gus Peterson asked about HB 3488, questioning how the details of the border move would be worked out.

"What would all of the consequences be? All of our zoning laws would change; all of our governing laws for how we do things as a county would change. Is there anything on the table for having a task force to study that?" asked Peterson. "If we are going to continue this discussion, let's play it out. What would it actually look like?"

McCaw said that is the precise purpose of HB 3488.

"It's a task force. It brings various groups together," he told Peterson. "It lists out all the different people that we would want to be part of the task force to look at all these sorts of issues."

Some of the issues included existing laws, transfer of assets and even how to handle prisons located in Eastern Oregon.

"All of those big questions that are very difficult for a county to answer, or an individual," he said. "That's what this task force is designed to do."

As far as other action at the county level, McCaw urged the commissioners to promote the idea with legislators.

"Counties can't change the border. The counties can advocate for change for their citizens," he told the commissioners.

McCaw added that, so far, nine counties in Eastern Oregon have written letters to their respective legislators and the governor asking the legislature to take up the issue. To date, Morrow County is not among them.

Nor has the Eastern Oregon Counties Association written a support letter, despite a majority of its members having passed measures in support of Greater Idaho.

No public comment was taken during that portion of the BOC meeting, but questions can be submitted through the movement's website, GreaterIdaho.org.

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